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Report

Eastern Europe Joins the Western Balkans

A New Start for the EU's Enlargement Policy

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ReThink.CEE Fellowship

June 2023

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Summary

The geopolitical shock of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has resuscitated the EU's enlargement policy, which had been in a stalemate for years. In June 2022, the EU granted candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine, and recognized Georgia as a potential candidate. This seemed unrealistic before for these "front-runners" of the Eastern Partnership policy, which for long has been perceived in the EU as an alternative to enlargement. Moreover, significant progress was made in the EU's relations with the Western Balkan countries, with accession negotiations finally opened with Albania and North Macedonia after years of delay, and Bosnia and Herzegovina designated as a candidate country.

These important decisions have created elevated expectations regarding the next steps in the countries of both regions. However, the risk of disillusionment with the enlargement policy in the EU and the candidate countries is high, unless the shortcomings of the current process are addressed by both sides. This paper looks at how enlargement policy could become more credible and effective for new and old candidate states while remaining attractive and beneficial also for the EU and its member states.

To this end, the paper examines the current configuration of the enlargement policy and the impacts of Russia's war in Ukraine on it. It also takes stock of the challenges and shortcomings of the enlargement process, based on lessons from the Western Balkans' long-running experience with it. While enlargement policy has become more significant for the EU and the candidate countries since 2022, the progress of the latter towards membership remains challenging in view of their problematic internal developments as well as doubts regarding the EU's absorption capacity and disagreements among member states. The paper looks at existing ideas for reforming enlargement policy and possible optimal ways ahead in terms of tweaks to the EU's policy and the candidate countries' accession strategies and expectations.

Existing proposals for a gradual EU accession should be the cornerstone of reforms to enlargement policy. This model envisages that candidate countries will be able to get greater access to EU programs and funds based on their progress in accession negotiations even before full membership. This can help create positive dynamics in the accession process given that addressing the EU's absorption capacity issues will likely take many years.

However, the proposed institutional changes alone will not be sufficient to overcome the existing enlargement challenges. Therefore, there are additional steps the EU and its member states can take to make the accession process more credible. It is also necessary to build grassroots support for enlargement in the EU and in the candidate countries as well as to further invest in democratic consolidation in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe—while simultaneously developing better mechanisms of post-accession conditionality to guarantee the compliance of new member states with EU norms and rules. As far as the candidate countries are concerned, their governments must avoid creating unrealistic expectations around the enlargement process among their populations and find ways to cooperate among themselves on accession-related matters.

Introduction

Until 2022, the EU's relations with its Southeastern and Eastern European neighbors were structured in two distinct policies: the Western Balkan countries were covered by enlargement policy while Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine fell under the Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy.¹ The fundamental difference between these two policies concerned the recognition of the respective countries' eligibility for eventual EU membership. While the EU recognized a "European perspective" for the Western Balkan states in 2003, it generally saw the EaP as an integration model that was an alternative to enlargement.

Russia's full invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a deep change to this "two-basket" approach of the EU. On February 28, Ukraine submitted its membership application, soon followed by Georgia and Moldova. The EU's decision in June 2022 to grant Moldova and Ukraine the status of candidate countries, while designating Georgia as a potential candidate, revived political discussions over the future of enlargement policy after years of stalemate. The EU claims that a credible enlargement policy is a geostrategic investment in peace, stability, security, and prosperity in Europe.²

The decision regarding these three EaP "front-runners" placed them on the same level as the Western Balkan countries, which Moldova and Ukraine viewed as an opportunity to quickly move toward membership in the EU. However, the Western Balkan experience demonstrates that obtaining the status of EU candidate far from guarantees a smooth accession process. Over the past 20 years, only Croatia out of the Western Balkan countries has managed to become an EU member while for the rest the process stalled on both sides. Until 2022, there had been a widely shared feeling on the side of the Western Balkan countries that the promise of EU membership was not credible, while their struggle to carry out genuine domestic reforms and to overcome their interstate and intrastate divisions had been a disappointment for the EU.³

There is a need for the EU and the candidate states to learn lessons from the Western Balkans' long-running accession process.

Therefore, although the geopolitical shock of the war in Ukraine seems to have resuscitated the EU's enlargement process, the EU and the candidate states must learn lessons from the Western Balkans' long-running accession process. There is also a need for the EU to rethink its approach to enlargement as well as for the candidate countries to revisit their accession strategies and expectations. This is important to avoid similar experiences of enlargement fatigue in the EU and reform stagnation in the expanded group of the candidate countries at a time when nondemocratic powers, particularly China and Russia, may seek to further destabilize the EU's neighbors or undermine the EU's agenda in both regions.

This paper examines how the EU's enlargement policy has been affected by the granting of candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine in the wake of Russia's full invasion of the latter since February 2022. The first section examines the current configuration of the enlargement policy and its changes throughout 2022. The second section looks at the challenges and shortcomings of the enlargement process to date. The third section considers existing ideas for reforming enlargement policy. The paper then draws conclusions from these ideas and provides

recommendations as to how the EU and the candidate countries can ensure the credibility and effectiveness of the enlargement process.⁴

The EU's Enlargement Policy

In the course of its history, the EU has expanded several times, enlarging from six founding members to 27 member states today. At the same time, the waiting line of those wishing to join it has never disappeared. Until 2022, the EU's enlargement policy covered the Western Balkan countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, as well as Turkey.

As for its eastern neighbors (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), the EU dealt with them through the Eastern Partnership (EaP) policy launched in 2009. The essence of this policy was to promote closer cooperation and integration with these six countries without promising them a European perspective. Although Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine had been on the integration path as associate countries since 2014, with their Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements in place, the EU had only acknowledged their "European aspirations" without committing itself politically to this goal. Since the "big-bang enlargement" of 2004, when eight Central and Eastern European countries joined the EU, and the subsequent accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, the question of further enlargement to the east was explicitly or implicitly dismissed in the intra-EU political discussions. Hence, there was a strong conceptual difference between the enlargement policy and the EaP policy. This was met with grievances on the part of the three EaP front-runners, which even created an Associated Trio format in 2021 to push harder to "enhance their political association and economic integration with the EU", in line with their European aspirations.⁵

Although the Western Balkan and EaP countries alike were interested in joining the EU long before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, this shock generated a greater push for membership on their part. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine applied for EU membership and, in June, following the European Commission's opinion, the European Council decided to give Moldova and Ukraine candidate status, while Georgia was designated as a potential candidate. The new geopolitical reality enhanced the significance and momentum of the enlargement policy on both sides. Thus, the EU also officially started accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in July after years of delays, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status in December, and Kosovo officially submitted its membership application in December.

The EU's Interests in Enlargement

Enlargement policy is widely seen as the most powerful foreign policy instrument the EU has.⁶ It has been able to use this leverage from the economic and political conditions attached to the prospect of membership to push for domestic transformation in aspiring members over the past decades.

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Table 1. The Waiting Line for EU Membership

Candidate Countries	Applied for Membership	Candidate Status Granted	Status of Negotiations
 Albania	April 2009	June 2014	Started in July 2022
 Bosnia & Herzegovina	February 2016	December 2022	Not yet Started
 Moldova	March 2022	June 2022	Not yet Started
 Montenegro	December 2008	December 2010	Started in June 2012
 North Macedonia	March 2004	December 2005	Started in July 2022
 Serbia	December 2009	March 2012	Started in January 2014
 Turkey	April 1987	December 1999	Started in October 2005, stalled since 2016
 Ukraine	February 2022	June 2022	Not yet Started
Potential Candidate			
 Georgia	March 2022		
Application Submitted			
 Kosovo	December 2022		

By extending its influence and rules beyond its borders via the process of integration, the EU has primarily sought to foster peace and stability in adjoining regions.⁷ For instance, the push for the recognition of the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries arose in the aftermath of the wars in the region in the 1990s. Through the Stabilization and Association process with Western Balkan states, the EU hoped to facilitate their reconciliation and to keep them on the course of their integration with the EU.⁸ The promise of membership remains a source of leverage for the EU in trying to reduce the tensions between Kosovo and Serbia or in addressing the internal issues of Bosnia and Herzegovina. For the EU, the stability of these countries is also crucial for tackling migration inflows, for combating organized crime, and for dealing with other transnational issues. Similar considerations can be applied to the EU's eastern neighborhood, especially in view of consequences of the war in Ukraine.

Enlargement policy is becoming more strategically important for the EU also in light of its rising competition with other major powers, particularly China. While Russia's political influence in the Western Balkans and the EaP countries has been a cause of EU concern for a long time, China has substantially expanded its economic presence in the Western Balkans through its Belt and Road initiative.⁹ Illiberal and autocratic powers like Turkey and Saudi Arabia are also active in the region, which risks undermining the EU's democracy agenda there. Hence, stronger integration of the candidate countries, including their incorporation in the EU, is one of the few tools that the EU has to keep the vulnerable countries in its strategically important southern and eastern neighborhoods on track with their democratic development.

The strategic significance of enlargement for the EU can be also assessed in a long-term perspective, especially in view of its negative demographic trends.¹⁰ In this light, adding new member states, including a large and populous country like Ukraine, would help the EU address its needs for human and other resources in the decades to come. Moreover, expansion of the EU to the Western Balkans and to further in Eastern Europe would mean the creation of a larger bloc built on shared EU values and regulations, which would make the EU more competitive vis-à-vis other powers on the global stage.

Applicants' Interests in Enlargement

Countries apply for EU membership mostly for identity, geopolitical and economic reasons. Those that are officially recognized by the EU as candidates receive financial and technical assistance to help them modernize and conduct reforms in line with the requirements of EU integration under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA).¹¹ Besides this, the accession process envisages duty-free access to EU markets, assistance for economic development and investment packages, and participation in a wide range of EU projects.¹²

Despite the slow pace of their accession process over the past decade, public support for EU membership remains high in most of the Western Balkan countries except Serbia (around 75% on average across the six countries), with the highest support in North Macedonia and Kosovo (over 85%).¹³ At the same time, the current support rates represent a drop compared to recent years and to the heyday of public support for EU accession in the region in 2006–2008, when even in Serbia the majority of the population was in favor.¹⁴ In the eastern neighborhood, public

support for EU membership is highest in Ukraine (92% in February 2023), where the issue has become existential in view of the war,¹⁵ followed by Georgia (85% in September 2022)¹⁶ and Moldova (63% in November 2022).¹⁷

The War's Impact

Russia's full invasion of Ukraine has enhanced the significance of enlargement policy for the candidate countries and for the EU. First, it has made the EU rethink its view of the position of the EaP between Russia and itself. In granting Moldova and Ukraine candidate status, the EU overcame its implicit taboo about a membership offer to countries in its Eastern neighborhood.

Ukraine has been the most vocal country about the need for such a step. The question of joining the EU has become its vision for the future and a cornerstone of any postwar settlement and reconstruction. This vision has been expressed also by top EU officials, notably European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.¹⁸ Ukraine has highlighted the urgency of its application and called for a fast-track accession procedure. While this is opposed by many EU officials and politicians, it has spurred discussions about the need to add dynamism to the enlargement process.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has also heightened the EU's geostrategic interests in the Western Balkans. In the declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit in Tirana in December 2022, the EU and the region's governments acknowledged the growing importance of strategic partnership between them. The EU has become increasingly concerned about Russia's footprint in the Western Balkans. Even before the war in Ukraine, Russia had been shaping politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Serbia, based on historical ties, close political relations, and energy supplies.¹⁹ In 2022, Russia's influence manifested itself in Serbia's refusal to join the EU's sanctions regime against Russia, while the Russian-supported entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, voiced its support for President Vladimir Putin and blocked EU-related reforms in the country. Russia has also been accused of being behind the attempt to overthrow the government in Montenegro in 2016. It is widely believed to continuously pursue a strategy of destabilizing the region through espionage, cyberattacks, and large disinformation, propaganda, and political meddling operations.²⁰

At the Tirana summit, the EU struck a more positive tone than before toward the Western Balkan countries in an attempt to address the current political reality. It produced a new €1 billion package for dealing with the fallout of the energy crisis, and it announced new measures including reduced roaming charges and closer integration in higher education.²¹ Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama welcomed the EU's renewed interest in the region, stating that "things are changing".²²

Although some EU member states warned initially that granting candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine would be unjust to the Western Balkan states, the region's leaders have welcomed the dynamism that the EaP countries' membership applications brought to enlargement policy. Ahead of the EU's decision in June 2022, the leaders of Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia issued messages of support for Ukraine's membership aspiration.²³ The

three countries wanted to present themselves not as competitors on the EU integration path but as partners “that complement and strengthen each other’s capabilities”.

These policy developments have paralleled a shift in public opinion in the member states, which, except in Austria, has become more favorable to enlargement since the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.²⁴ The European Parliament, traditionally among the most vocal supporters of enlargement, was again at the forefront in 2022. In its Recommendation on the New EU Strategy for Enlargement, adopted in November, it stressed that enlargement policy is “the EU’s strongest geopolitical tool” and called for re-energizing it.²⁵ This position has been supported by the top EU officials, with European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President von der Leyen saying that the enlargement process should become more effective and more dynamic.²⁶

However, if previous issues remain unresolved, the addition of new candidate countries risks remaining a symbolic gesture rather than bringing a real revitalization of enlargement policy. The elevated expectations of Moldova and Ukraine about entering the accession process, which they see as a fundamental upgrade from their status as simply EaP countries, looks unwarranted given the decade-long waiting time faced by the Western Balkan states. The frustrating experience of the Western Balkans has to be taken into account in order to make the accession process more credible for all parties involved and to manage their expectations.

While Russia’s war against Ukraine has deepened the mutual interest in enlargement of the EU and the candidate countries, the question is how to make it work. This is a challenge in view of problematic internal developments in the candidate countries, the EU’s lack of absorption capacity, and disagreements over the matter among member states.






The Current Accession Process

According to the Treaty on European Union, any European country can apply for membership if it respects the EU’s democratic values and is committed to promoting them. However, the EU’s consideration of membership applications is rigorous, consisting of several stages of approval procedures in which legal, technical, and political considerations are intertwined (see Table 2).²⁷

A country has to meet the key criteria for accession, known as Copenhagen Criteria.²⁸ These are grouped in three categories:

- Political criteria: having in place stable democratic institutions ensuring respect for the rule of law, human rights, and the protection of minorities.
- Economic criteria: having a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces in the EU.
- EU acquis criteria: having the ability to accept and implement the body of common EU membership rights and obligations.

Table 2: The Steps in the EU Accession Process

Stage	Steps	Position of Countries
Stage 1	<p>1. Country submits application to the EU Council Presidency. <i>The EU Council asks the European Commission for an opinion on the merits of the application in light of the membership criteria.</i></p>	<p>Kosovo</p> 
	<p>2. European Commission submits an opinion on the application. <i>The European Commission recommends granting the country candidate status or specifies reforms that it needs to carry out to move forward.</i></p>	<p>Georgia</p> 
	<p>3. Member states decide unanimously to grant the country candidate status.</p>	<p>Bosnia & Herzegovina, Moldova, Ukraine</p> 
Stage 2	<p>4. Accession negotiations are opened with the first intergovernmental conference, upon agreement of all member states.</p>	
	<p>5. The European Commission proposes a draft negotiating framework as a basis for talks, which should be agreed upon by all member states.</p>	<p>Albania, North Macedonia</p> 
	<p>6. Policy chapters are negotiated and the candidate country prepares to implement EU laws and standards. <i>The European Commission carries out detailed examination of the country's legislation under each chapter in the form of a screening report, which is presented to member states. The EU Council decides by unanimity on the opening and closing of negotiation chapters, upon the European Commission's recommendations.</i></p>	<p>Montenegro, (33 chapters opened, 3 provisionally closed) Serbia, (22 chapters opened, 2 provisionally closed) Turkey (16 chapters opened, 1 provisionally closed, process frozen since 2016)</p> 
Stage 3	<p>7. Once negotiations on all chapters are finalized, the European Commission gives its opinion on the country's readiness to become a member state.</p>	
	<p>8. The member states decide unanimously to close the negotiation process. The European Parliament must also give its consent.</p>	
	<p>9. All member states and the candidate country sign and ratify the accession treaty.</p>	

The first stage of the process covers the period from a country's membership application to its designation as a candidate country by the EU. In the case of the Western Balkan countries, conditions for membership additional to the Copenhagen Criteria were set out in the Stabilization and Association Process in 1999, which relate to regional cooperation and good relations among the countries of the region.

Since these criteria are formulated in quite general terms, there is room for differences in their interpretation, and the European Commission has discretion in the evaluation of whether a country meets them. Based on the European Commission's opinion, the European Council can grant candidate status to an applicant country, which requires a unanimous decision by the member states. An applicant country may receive recommendations from the European Commission to implement additional reforms along with candidate status. This was the case for Moldova and Ukraine, which were given by the European Commission tailored lists of further steps in various reform areas, from anti-corruption to national minority policy. Alternatively, a country can be designated as a potential candidate if it is judged that it still requires to carry out substantial reforms to obtain candidate status.

The second stage of the process consists of the opening of formal negotiations between a candidate country and the EU upon the agreement of all member states. The purpose is for the country to bring its legislation in line with EU laws and standards by implementing the necessary judicial, administrative, economic, and other reforms. Once the European Council has given the green light, the negotiations take place in intergovernmental conferences between the member states and the candidate country.

In this process, the European Commission carries out, jointly with the candidate country, a detailed examination of each policy field (chapter), which it presents for the European Council's consideration in the form of screening reports. There are 35 negotiating chapters corresponding to policy areas of the EU acquis. Out of these, 33 chapters are divided into six clusters: fundamentals; internal market; competitiveness and inclusive growth; green agenda and sustainable connectivity; resources, agriculture; and cohesion; and external relations.²⁹ Two other chapters—institutions and other issues—are handled separately at the end of the process. Based on the European Commission's reports, priorities for key reforms are identified, and the European Council then decides on the basis of unanimity whether to open negotiations for each concerned chapter.

The European Commission also produces annual reports taking stock of the state of play in each candidate and potential candidate country. These reports, alongside the European Commission's communication outlining proposals for the way forward for the enlargement policy, form the "enlargement package".³⁰ In October 2022, the European Council tasked the European Commission with producing in the autumn of 2023 an assessment of developments in all ten applicant countries in its regular enlargement package.³¹

The third and final stage of the process covers the conclusion of negotiations, once every chapter has been closed, upon the consent of all member states. At this point, an accession treaty is signed, which contains all transitional arrangements and deadlines as well as details of financial arrangements and any safeguard clauses. This treaty needs the European Parliament's consent and the European Council's unanimous approval before all member states and the candidate country can sign it. The member states and candidate country then ratify the accession treaty in line with their respective constitutional rules.

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Table 3: Duration of EU Accession Process for Central and Eastern European States After 1990



The duration of the accession process can vary substantially for each country, depending on its internal developments and the political considerations of member states. For instance, while Montenegro and Serbia moved from the first to the second stage within two years, it took eight years for Albania and 17 years for North Macedonia to start accession negotiations with the EU. Of the Western Balkan states that were offered a European perspective in 2003, only Croatia has joined the EU so far, and none of the others is anywhere close.

The experience of Western Balkan countries has been very different from those that joined the EU in the more recent rounds of enlargement. For instance, for eight Central and Eastern European states in the 2004 enlargement, the process from application to membership took less than ten years. For Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the EU in 2007, the process was completed within 12 years (see Table 3). These countries also went through several stages: first signing Europe Agreements or Association Agreements, opening of accession negotiations, assessment of their progress by the European Commission in regular reports, “screenings”, and so on. However, their accession processes were moved forward by a clear aim and drive on both sides to complete enlargement, and both sides agreed on the priorities and precise timetables for this to happen.³² This has not been the case with the accession process for the current applicants and candidates.

The EU’s capacity to absorb additional member states is also a crucial factor in the accession process. This concerns budgetary issues, decision-making arrangements, and the general structure of EU governance, all of which are affected by the addition of new members. While the EU’s growth to its current membership of 27 has not been entirely smooth, the addition of up to ten more members would pose even more acute challenges that need to be tackled.

Given all of the above, progress in the enlargement process depends in many aspects on political considerations on the EU’s side and on that of the applicants and candidates.

Challenges of Enlargement Policy

Until 2022, there was a widely shared feeling that the EU’s enlargement policy was deadlocked. The challenges of the accession process can be grouped into three categories: domestic politics in the candidate countries, politicization of the process by EU member states, and the EU’s absorption capacity.

There have been issues with domestic reforms in most of the applicant and candidate countries, which was repeatedly reflected in the European Commission’s annual reports, including the most recent ones in October 2022.³³ Bosnia and Herzegovina remains riven by internal divisions, with Republika Srpska blocking state-level legislative and executive institutions, which has led to an almost complete standstill in reforms. Montenegro has experienced government instability, rule of law issues, and vulnerability to large-scale corruption. Serbia has diverged from the EU’s foreign policy direction as it built closer relations with China and Russia, and it is still struggling with problems connected to the lack of judicial independence, shrinking media freedom, and corruption. Moreover, the recent escalation in tension between Serbia and Kosovo also endangers both countries’

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prospects for EU membership, which for Kosovo is exacerbated by the fact that it is still not recognized by five member states.³⁴ Even Albania and North Macedonia, which are generally considered to be the Western Balkan countries most committed to the EU integration process, still need to deliver on their reform priorities, including in the key areas of the rule of law and the fight against corruption and organized crime.

The enlargement process has been often politicized by EU member states that demonstrated a lack of objectivity in some instances. As noted, member states have many opportunities to block or delay the accession process at all its stages. Some of them have used this power to gain leverage in bilateral disputes with candidate countries. The treatment of North Macedonia is the most notorious example of such politicization of the accession process. After the country resolved its long dispute with Greece by changing its name under the Prespa Agreement in 2018, France blocked its further progress in 2019, mostly for domestic electoral reasons, and Bulgaria did so too in 2020 over bilateral historical issues. Bulgaria and France took this approach despite the European Commission recommending to open negotiations with North Macedonia back in 2018, which caused disappointment and frustration on the part of all EU institutions. For instance, European Council President Donald Tusk and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker called the 2019 decision not to open accession negotiations with the two candidate countries “a historic mistake”, a view shared by Juncker’s successor, Ursula von der Leyen and the then-President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli.³⁵ Members of the European Parliament have also repeatedly called on the EU Council to stop delaying accession talks.

The enlargement process has been often politicized by EU member states that demonstrated a lack of objectivity in some instances.

As agreed between the EU and the two countries, Albania and North Macedonia were grouped in this process, meaning that their progress toward meeting the criteria for membership was assessed and evaluated together. While both generally saw this grouping as a positive step that would allow them to advance toward membership more quickly and effectively, at some stages their accession processes were held hostages of each other’s disputes and issues with member states. The absence of a common understanding in the EU about the requirements for reforms demanded from the candidate countries has also been a problem, with the interpretation of these requirements by member states not always coinciding with the European Commission’s reading.³⁶

While the Western Balkan countries have had a sense of grievance mostly toward the member states, under the current European Commission in place since 2019, there have been reported concerns in Brussels and beyond the EU’s borders about the perceived lack of impartiality of the Enlargement Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi, who was nominated by Hungary.³⁷ He has reportedly favored the advancement of Serbia, which enjoys very close relations with Hungary, downplaying concerns about democracy and the rule of law in the country, while not being sufficiently engaged in impartial solution to the member states’ blocking of opening of the EU’s negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. Várhelyi’s reported political orientation toward his home country has recently become a concern for Ukraine too, in view of the tensions between the two countries over the status of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine and Hungary’s continuous cooperation with Russia despite the war. Ukraine fears that Várhelyi could block its accession progress for domestic political reasons, which would also affect Moldova.³⁸

Many European governments and experts hold the view that the EU is not ready to integrate more members.³⁹ This concerns predominantly the impact of enlargement on the EU's effectiveness in decision-making, which is already quite difficult in view of unanimity voting requirement in several areas, including the common foreign and security policy, the accession of new members, taxation, and social security. There are also apprehensions about economic disparities between the EU and the candidate countries since their accession would mean an increase in the number of net beneficiaries from the EU budget at the expense of wealthier member states. As analysts point out, the EU budget must be reformed before the remaining Western Balkan countries, Moldova, or Ukraine can be taken in, as it will hardly be possible to grant them the same level of EU funding for agriculture and regional policy that members receive now.⁴⁰

What is more, many "old" member states have been skeptical about enlargement due to the experience of democratic backsliding, government instability, and corruption in some of the "new" member states, such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. Developments in these countries have caused doubts about the EU's ability to keep member states committed to its fundamental values once the conditionality of the pre-accession period is removed. As much as budget and decision-making reforms are needed, this is a problem that also needs to be fixed to prevent similar tendencies in future member states. All of this has made countries like Denmark, France, Germany, and the Netherlands condition their support for further enlargement on reforming the EU to make it prepared for the challenges that a new intake of members would bring.

A Vicious Circle

All these factors together have led to enlargement fatigue in the EU and to disenchantment with the EU in the candidate countries in the Western Balkans. This has created a vicious circle: the prospect of not advancing on their EU path, regardless of their achievements, is undermining the candidate countries' reform efforts, while their backtracking on reforms and socioeconomic development stirs further resistance to enlargement by some member states.

The problem is exacerbated by the fact that politicians in some Western Balkan countries, particularly in Serbia and in North Macedonia, have fueled Eurosceptic sentiment in the public, which they have used as leverage in negotiations with the EU. For instance, by placing the blame on the EU for Serbia's slow accession progress, the government in Belgrade has tried to divert public attention from its own backsliding on democratic reforms and abuses of political power.⁴¹ There is also a tendency on the part of some Western Balkan politicians to portray the EU as just one among the external players in the region, implicitly suggesting that it is losing its leverage and attractiveness given China's or Russia's footprint there. This is especially relevant in view of the Chinese investments coming with no reform conditionality attached. However, such claims misinform the public since the EU still remains the key partner of the Western Balkan states despite the large-scale Chinese investments in the region.⁴²

The EU has been trying to address this perception issue by making the scale and range of its support to the Western Balkan countries more visible, and by encouraging the governments in candidate countries to reflect

this in their domestic public debate and communication.⁴³ However, more needs to be done in this regard so that citizens in the candidate countries can appreciate the concrete benefits of integration with the EU and realize that no other international player can offer an alternative to this.

Even some pro-EU Balkan politicians, including the current leaders of Albania and North Macedonia, have expressed fatigue with the way in which member states have handled the accession process. Their narratives became more optimistic with the breakthrough decisions of 2022, but should the process become protracted again, disillusionment with the EU in these countries could pave the way to the return of old nationalist slogans.⁴⁴

With the addition of Moldova and Ukraine to the list of EU candidate countries in 2022, some of the challenges and shortcomings of the enlargement process could be exacerbated. The promise of a quick accession by the leadership of the two EaP countries to their domestic audiences can create unrealistic expectations among the population. For instance, Ukraine's Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal has said that Ukraine hopes for accession within as short period of time as two years,⁴⁵ while Moldova's President Maia Sandu has expressed hope that Moldova will join the EU before 2030.⁴⁶ As the experience of the Western Balkan countries shows, initial over-optimism regarding the timeline of accession usually results in a clash between reality and expectations, leading to disillusionment and a decline in support for the EU, which risks undermining the process.⁴⁷ Such over-optimism can be explained by either the limited understanding of the EU rules and policies on the part of political leaders or by their attempts to gain popularity among the electorate in the short-term by making membership seem closer than it really is, or both, and this can hurt the EU's image even in such an EU-oriented country like Ukraine. As one expert puts it, public expectations should be "just right" to enable the transformative dynamics of the accession process and to get society's support for necessary reforms.⁴⁸

Taking everything into account, the EU's efforts to make the accession process more credible should unfold in parallel with the creation of tangible and realistic benefits for the applicant countries' populations along the way, as well as with the moderation of the applicant countries' narratives on the enlargement process.

Proposals for Reforming Enlargement

In 2020, the European Commission adopted a new enlargement strategy, which proposed to reinvigorate the process based on four principles: more credibility, a stronger political steer (that is, the increased involvement of member states in the monitoring and review of candidates' progress), greater predictability, and a more dynamic process through grouping negotiation chapters into clusters.⁴⁹ While this was a step into the right direction, there are reasons to assume that, were it not for the turbulent developments of 2022, the same issues would have remained under the new strategy. Therefore, there is still a need for a more profound rethinking of the EU's approach to the accession process. Amid the new geopolitical reality since Russia's full invasion of Ukraine, many ideas have been floated by the EU institutions, political leaders, and analysts for how to improve the enlargement policy.

For example, Germany's Chancellor Olaf Scholz has proposed that the EU should move toward majority voting on taxation, foreign policy, sanctions, and other issues that currently require unanimity. He also proposed that the size of the European Parliament and the European Commission should not grow with the addition of every new member state.

France's President Emmanuel Macron has promoted a new European Political Community, which envisages the creation of an outer circle of the EU's associates and allies, such as Western Balkan States, the EaP countries, and the United Kingdom. When the idea was introduced in May 2022, France's official communication was ambiguous regarding how the European Political Community would relate to enlargement: some in Paris saw it as an alternative while others thought it could be complementary.⁵⁰ The Western Balkan countries and EaP front-runners initially perceived this new format negatively as a substitute to a regular accession track until they received assurances from the EU that this would not be the case.⁵¹

The most concrete vision for enlargement policy was expressed by European Council President Charles Michel in May 2022, when he proposed a model of phased integration with socioeconomic benefits for candidate countries during the accession talks rather than when they join the EU.⁵² These benefits would depend on a country's progress and would be reversible in case of backtracking. They would include access to EU programs and funding; integration in certain sectors of the internal market, the EU roaming area or the common energy market; and participation in the Council of Ministers in an advisory capacity. In December 2022, the European Council adopted conclusions on enlargement that encouraged "the further advancement of gradual integration between the European Union and partners already during the enlargement process in a reversible and merit-based manner".⁵³

The European Parliament's Recommendation on the New EU Strategy for Enlargement also suggested to offer candidate countries membership-oriented roadmaps with clear performance benchmarks, progress on which would allow them to access the above-described benefits. At the same time, the European Parliament called for the introduction of qualified majority voting in areas relevant to the accession process, encouraged EU institutional reforms, and expressed the need for the EU to further engage in democratic transformation of candidate countries.⁵⁴

The most concrete vision for enlargement policy was expressed by European Council President Charles Michel in May 2022, when he proposed a model of phased integration.

In expert circles, the idea of gradual or staged EU accession has been circulating since 2021.⁵⁵ Some experts suggest that there should be different benefits for countries that are still negotiating on chapters (at the pre-accession stage) and those that reach all the accession benchmarks (the consolidation stage, when a country has met the formal criteria and moves to an accession treaty). Even at the pre-accession stage candidate countries, depending on their reform progress, would get access to increased EU funds and programs, as well as participate in the single market and in various EU bodies in an observer or advisory capacity—a provision congruent with Michel's proposal. There are also suggestions for quantitatively rating of candidate countries'

advancement on chapter implementation in order to have more robust benchmarks that would lead to these additional benefits, and for switching to qualified majority voting in the EU Council for opening and closing chapters, which is in line with what the European Parliament supports. It is at the consolidation phase, however, where the key change is proposed by experts to grant almost full benefits of EU membership to a country before it formally becomes a member, the exceptions being a veto right in decision-making and having a commissioner. According to the authors of this idea, besides the benefits such a system would bring to the candidate countries, it is also supposed to reassure existing member states that further enlargement will not damage the governability of the EU, which is regarded as their key apprehension.⁵⁶

The Way Ahead

Given that deliberations among member states over solutions to address the EU's absorption capacity issues are likely to take many years, the model of a gradual EU accession seem to be best placed to address the most pressing challenges of the enlargement process. From the point of view of candidate countries, this would mean their integration into numerous EU policy fields, offering them tangible benefits along the way. This may have a positive effect on their economies, political systems and public perceptions in several ways.

First, in economic terms, access to the single market would result in mutually beneficial trade relations between the candidate countries and the EU. The EU is already the main trade partner of the Western Balkan countries in exports (81.0%) and imports (57.9%), amounting to €28.2 billion and €36.9 billion respectively in 2021.⁵⁷ In the same year, the EU's trade in goods with Ukraine amounted to €28.3 billion in exports and €24.1 billion in imports, with Moldova to €3.2 billion in exports and €1.8 billion in imports, and with Georgia to €2 billion in exports and €0.8 billion in imports. Due to their Free and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements, these three countries are better integrated with the EU with regard to their access to its markets than the Western Balkan countries. The current negotiations of a roadmap for Ukraine's further integration into the single market can be a good example for the preparation of similar arrangements for other candidate countries, provided they adopt relevant acquis and technical standards.

Second, with regard to additional funding for candidate countries, while their access to the EU's structural funds is very unlikely to be supported by the member states, increased IPA funding and other extra-budgetary financing in exchange for progress on accession-related reforms can be a great stimulus for them to stay on the reform track during the lengthy second stage of chapter negotiations. A detailed and predictable system for rewarding the implementation of reforms would increase the cost of backtracking on them. With good strategic communication by the EU, the population in candidate countries can be made aware of the clear connection between their government's performance on EU-related reforms and the benefits that progress in these brings. This, in turn, would create greater grassroots demand for domestic transformation. This would likely favor EU-oriented political forces and prevent democratic backsliding and illiberal developments in candidate countries. Hence, the gradual accession model is a good strategy to sustain domestic support for EU integration despite the long waiting time

for membership. These factors taken together would also incentivize governments in candidate countries to make progress on difficult chapters.

Finally, closer integration with the EU in such sectors as trade, climate, energy, research, health, and foreign and defense policy would make candidate countries feel as part of the EU “space” even while still on their way to membership. At the same time, their inclusion in EU internal debates at the pre-accession stage—including through regular invitations to informal European Council meetings, their participation in its meetings in an advisory capacity, or observer status at other EU institutions, would be a good opportunity for socialization and confidence-building for both sides. Through such measures, candidate countries would be able to familiarize themselves with the EU system while the member states would gain a greater understanding of the candidate countries through regular interaction with their representatives. By the time they reach the third stage of the accession process, candidate countries would be de facto integrated into the EU, with the exceptions noted above.

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The examples of the EU’s roaming agreement with the Western Balkan countries and of the integration of Moldova and Ukraine in the EU’s energy system have demonstrated that the EU is already de facto applying elements of the gradual accession model when it serves its strategic interests. However, to be anchored at the institutional level and be fully implemented, this model should be accompanied by a parallel reform of the EU internal decision-making system, at least in the area of enlargement, to limit the ability of individual member states to use their veto at all stages of accession negotiations, as is now the case.

As there will hardly be much appetite among member states to agree to such a reform, efforts to improve the members states’ attitudes toward the enlargement policy and toward individual candidate countries would be essential. It is important for the European Commission and for pro-EU governments, political movements, civil society, and media to communicate the strategic importance and benefits of enlargement to the public in member states, as well as to address specific apprehensions behind the enlargement skepticism.

As indicated by recent research on public perceptions in two fundamentally enlargement-skeptical countries, France and the Netherlands, much of the disapproval is attributed to general Euroscepticism, concerns about the rule of law and civil rights in candidate countries, sentiments about their economic weakness, and lack of personal experience of a given country.⁵⁸ The previously mentioned disappointment with corruption and rule-of-law issues in the new member states as well as perceptions of the high costs of enlargement have also affected European public perceptions of the current accession negotiations. Therefore, there is a need for candidate countries to try to affect member states’ perceptions of their membership bids through active public diplomacy, encouraging tourism and people-to-people contacts with EU citizens, and engaging directly with the governments of skeptical EU members.

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to look into concrete ways to resolve the issue of the EU's absorption capacity, especially its budgetary and governance aspects, it can be highlighted that the political will of member states to do so would depend above all on their noted perceptions. At the same time, the EU institutions and the "heavyweight" member states should take the lead in creating a more effective mechanism of permanent post-accession conditionality to make sure that countries continue to comply with EU norms and rules once they are members.

Moreover, while gradual accession would be central to keeping candidate countries on the right track and to delivering benefits to their societies, it should be backed by further EU support for democratic consolidation in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. It is crucial to invest more efforts into building grassroots support for EU norms and values in the societies of candidate countries so that they do not see integration as a purely transactional process. In this regard, support for independent media, civil society, and people-to-people contacts will be essential. Tackling disinformation should be part of these efforts. In the Western Balkans, the media carry narratives of nationalism and religious differences as well as spreading influence from China, Russia, and the Middle East. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are still struggling to curb Russian disinformation in popular communication channels.

In view of the above, the visibility of the results of EU integration in the candidate countries too needs to be enhanced, especially in the Western Balkan countries, where the EU's image is worse than in the EaP countries, especially Ukraine. Public opinion surveys show that economic concerns (unemployment, cost of living, high prices) and corruption remain the key preoccupation for citizens of all countries in the region.⁵⁹ While people in most of the Western Balkan countries correctly recognize the EU as their biggest foreign donor, this is not the case in Serbia, where China and Russia are seen as the main investors in the country's economy, and in Kosovo, where the United States is seen as main contributor to the economy. The EU's campaign in the region to highlight the scope of its investment and the practical benefits of its Economic and Investment Plan is a step into the right direction.⁶⁰ Yet, these messages need to reach broader parts of societies in the candidate countries, which tend to get most of their news from television rather than digital media. Therefore, besides online communication, the EU should find ways to be visible in both capitals and the regions of the candidate countries, including through events for different stakeholders such as local businesses, politicians, journalists, and activists, and to interact with relevant grassroot movements and initiatives.

Conclusion

Russia's full invasion of Ukraine has not only placed Moldova and Ukraine on the EU accession track; it has also generated fresh momentum in the relations between the EU and the Western Balkan countries aspiring to membership. The current geopolitical reality has demonstrated that the EU's enlargement policy remains relevant and needed by both sides in the medium and long term. While the debate about further enlargement is affected by the opposition of some member states, by domestic problems in the candidate countries, and by the EU's lack of absorption capacity absent comprehensive internal reforms, it is important to consider the strategic benefits that enlargement can bring. In 20 to 30 years' time, when the EU is projected to face demographic decline while

competition from major international players like China or other nondemocratic states increases, it will be in the EU's benefit to be bigger and stronger.

To achieve this, enlargement policy should be carried out in a way that strengthens the EU and the candidate countries alike, rather than one that adds to the frustration with democratic backsliding and political turmoil in the union, as is currently the case. The advances achieved in 2022—the granting of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, and Ukraine as well as the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia—were important steps in the right direction that resuscitated the enlargement policy. However, it is crucial that these breakthroughs do not remain as just one-time symbolic acts to demonstrate solidarity in response to the pressing external challenge of the war. The progress achieved in 2022 must be followed up by policy steps that would make the enlargement process more efficient in a longer-term perspective.

This is not an easy task, but some steps can be considered by the EU and the candidate countries to turn the accession process into a mutually beneficial policy. What is more, these should not be contingent upon each other but be taken in parallel.

The EU institutions and pro-EU governments and politicians in the member states have to continuously highlight the strategic significance of enlargement to their domestic audiences. This is needed to overcome the widespread skepticism about enlargement and the opposition to it by populist forces. It would hopefully reduce the risk of domestically politically motivated vetoes by member states at various stages of enlargement negotiations. Moreover, candidate countries should also invest in their public diplomacy beyond Brussels, especially towards skeptical EU member states, to improve public perceptions of their states among EU citizens.

The EU has to make the process more credible in practice, so that candidate countries have trust in the process and are convinced that their membership prospect is real, while existing members states are confident that the EU's rules and norms are not compromised.

The principle of a merit-based approach should be upheld, meaning that every candidate country is assessed objectively based on its performance regarding accession-related reforms. Some suggest that Moldova and Ukraine (and eventually Georgia) can be admitted to the EU only after the Western Balkan countries because the latter have been in the waiting line for a while; however, it is important not to let this time consideration override the objective performance of candidate countries. There should be no predefined first or second rows when it comes to accession timing.

The EU's requirements of candidate countries and assessment of their progress should be communicated by the European Commission and the member states more clearly and transparently to avoid political manipulations on both sides. Introducing quantitative rating of countries' advancement on negotiated chapters and clusters can be a good solution for this. The EU should maintain its stringent policy on democratic and acquis conditionality, and apply it equally to all candidates, thus excluding fast-track memberships. At the same time, it should make sure that there are no delays in a country's progress from one stage to another once it has met the objective policy requirements. The European Commission should ensure that officials occupying top positions with responsibility

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for enlargement policy have an impartial attitude to all countries aspiring to EU membership and can act as honest brokers in the process.

There is a need to create comprehensive and concrete incentives for candidate countries to keep progressing on the accession track despite the lengthy negotiation process. The different proposals for gradual integration are fit for this purpose. The European Commission should take these ideas on board as it prepares its annual enlargement package in the autumn and the mid-term review of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework budget, which is due 2023, with a view to scale up the IPA budget.

In parallel to formal accession negotiations with their governments, the EU should continue its democracy promotion efforts in the Western Balkan and the EaP candidate countries. This should include boosting support to independent media and civil society, youth exchanges, and programs for educational cooperation, as well as other measures that can help build grassroots support for EU integration and promote the narrative that reforms are needed for the sake of the candidate countries and not only because of EU demands. EU strategic communication focusing on the positive effects of the integration process on the standards of living in candidate countries is crucial.

Besides stimulating reforms in the candidate countries, the EU should start the ball rolling on its internal reforms to address the issue of its absorption capacity. This should include better mechanisms of post-accession conditionality to guarantee the compliance of new member states with EU norms and rules to avoid repeating the experience of countries backsliding on democracy and the rule of law after their accession.

The governments of the candidate countries should avoid creating unrealistic expectations in the publics regarding the speed of the accession process to prevent disappointment and a growth in Euroskeptic sentiments in the future. Instead, jointly with the EU, they should invest in increasing the level of public awareness about the EU system and policy processes. They should also take advantage of the practical benefits of a gradual EU integration process along the way and communicate this to domestic audiences.

Cooperation rather than rivalry between the EaP and Western Balkan countries on their path toward EU membership should be encouraged in the form of political exchanges and coordination, experience sharing at various levels, people-to-people contacts and economic cooperation. While maintaining a "positive competition" (that is, trying not to lag behind other countries that wish to move faster) to deliver on accession-related reforms, candidate countries will benefit from pooling their resources to advocate a favorable reform of enlargement policy and greater progress on their accession path.

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