

How to make the EU ready for Enlargement: Member States' perspective

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March 2025

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This policy paper was produced within the Think Visegrad in Brussels Fellowship programme. In the first half of 2016, eight think-tanks from the Visegrad Group that have been cooperating in the Think Visegrad platform, agreed on the idea proposed by the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, to create a common representation office in Brussels. The main motivation for it is the need to encourage debate on issues of common interest to the EU and the V4 and explain the positions of the V4 to a wide audience. Think Visegrad in Brussels would like to project an image of constructive partners, to explain the dynamics of the debates within our regions and to highlight our active contributions to EU policy-making. For more information about Think Visegrad and its members visit www.think.visegradfund.org.



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Introduction

Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 has brought EU enlargement back as a priority of the EU policy towards the neighbourhood and as a geopolitical tool to ensure peace, stability and prosperity on the entire continent. That resulted in the EU recognising the aspiration of the Associated Trio countries to join the EU and granting membership candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in 2022 and to Georgia in 2023. In record time, the former two countries also started the EU accession process in June 2024. The accession process of the candidates from the Western Balkans also accelerated. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) was granted the candidacy status and accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia started in 2022 (albeit only conditionally with the latter). Additionally, the EU presented the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans¹ aimed at incentivizing the reform process in the countries of the region. In parallel, a debate on how to prepare the EU for the next enlargement was launched at the initiative of Germany and France. These developments, along with statements of the high-level politicians that enlargement is back on the agenda, created the impression that enlargement has once again become a priority for the EU as the Union strives to enhance its position as a geopolitical actor.

However, despite the general consensus that enlargement is a geopolitical necessity, the question posed by French President Emmanuel Macron in Bratislava in 2023 – *How should we do it?* [enlargement]² – still remains unanswered. The member states differ widely on what should be the priority – widening or deepening of the EU - how these two processes should be linked, and what the timeframe of enlargement and reform should be. Furthermore, the credibility of the full-fledged membership promise for the Western Balkan countries has been significantly weakened in the past years, and the current debates on the gradual integration and the idea of concentric circles of integration rather enhance than dispel doubts regarding the outcome of the process desired by member states – full-fledged membership, accession to the Single Market only, or maybe some kind of deeper cooperation based on sectoral integration. The EU's internal debate on enlargement has become in-ward looking and focused predominantly on the absorption capacity and necessary internal adjustment of the EU.

Moreover, this debate omits the main challenge – how to make aspiring countries enlargement ready. Currently, none of them is and probably will not be ready in the foreseeable future, as enlargement policy lost its credibility and effectiveness, especially in the most crucial area of democratic governance.³ The Freedom House Nations in Transit reports reveal that the democratic institutions are still weak in most of the countries rated as partly free. Since 2017, only one recorded some improvements (Kosovo), Serbia's situation significantly deteriorated and in the case of the others, scores have not changed.⁴

¹ COM_2023_691_New Growth Plan Western Balkans,

https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8f5dbe63-e951-4180-9c32-298cae022d03_en?filename=COM_2023_691_New%20Growth%20Plan%20Western%20Balkans.pdf

² Closing speech by Emmanuel Macron, GLOBSEC summit in Bratislava, <https://is.ambafrance.org/Slovakia-GLOBSEC-summit-in-Bratislava-Closing-speech-by-M-Emmanuel-Macron>

³ According to the Scorecard of the European Stability Initiative based on Reports of the European Commission only Albania has slightly improved its score in the area of justice and fundamental rights (from some level of preparation to moderately prepared) since 2015. In the case of other countries, the improvements have been so modest that there has no impact on the overall assessment of the level of preparation or even as in the case of BiH a regress has been noted. Scorecard 2024, What the Commission assessments reveal.

<https://www.esiweb.org/publications/scorecard-2024-what-commission-assessments-reveal>;

⁴ Freedom in the Worlds Reports from 2017 till 2025,

<https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=fiw&year=2025>

Considering disagreements among the member states on how to adjust the enlargement process to current challenges, there is a high risk that this momentum will be lost and the process will be stalled again.

The transformative power of the enlargement process is based on the credible promise that membership is achievable in a reasonable timeframe, that progress in the process is merit-based (as a reward for actual reforms measured through objective criteria), and that the influence of bilateral vetoes on its dynamic is limited.⁵ However, currently the reality is very far from that and member states have not addressed the challenges that made this process ineffective in the past decades, i.e. bilateral blockades, weakening of the conditionality principle and very limited results in the crucial area of rule of law and democratic transformation. Consequently, it is very unlikely that without significant changes, the enlargement process will once again become truly transformative, especially in the Western Balkans where a long period of eroding and hesitant EU engagement resulted in the disillusionment of the local governing elites and societies⁶ that no longer believe that accession is still possible.

Moreover, the lack of reflection on how to make enlargement policy transformative (again) is combined with the lack of strong leadership in the EU, keen and able to move the process forward. Prolonging political crises in Germany and France and the strengthening of right-wing political parties that are reluctant towards both widening and deepening of the EU undermines political leaders' commitment to pursuing the enlargement policy. Currently, none of the political leaders in the member states openly push for the efficiently conducted future enlargement as an EU priority. In the past EU's institutional cycle, the active personal engagement of the president of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen contributed to swift progress in the enlargement process of the Associated Trio countries.

It is yet to be seen whether her level of commitment will be maintained, especially as the focus of the new Commission shifted to competitiveness, security and resilience,⁷ and other geopolitical challenges. The appointment of a commissioner with sole responsibility for the enlargement process (without the EU neighborhood policy portfolio) indicates a commitment to pushing the process forward. However, the question remains whether Marta Kos, the new Commissioner for Enlargement, who comes from a relatively small country and has neither experience in Brussels nor political authority, would be able to forge consensus among the member states on enlargement or to handle problematic cases like Serbia.

Additionally, enlargement also needs sustained support of the public in both the current and aspiring member states. The Russian full-fledged invasion of Ukraine resulted in a rapid increase in support for the enlargement policy in member states. The Summer 2022 Eurobarometer registered a record-high citizens' support to a new enlargement of the Union, which increased to 57 %.⁸

⁵ K. Bender, EU Enlargement and Europe's Future. How to Revive One of the EU's Most Successful Policies, 14 September 2023, <https://www.iwm.at/europes-futures/publication/eu-enlargement-and-europes-future-how-to-revive-one-of-the-eus-most>

⁶ According to the 2024 Balkan Barometer surveys 54% of citizens of the WB6 think that membership in the EU will be good for their country (decrease by 8 p.p. since 2021), the support is low especially in Serbia (34%) and Montenegro (39%). Moreover, 18% of respondents think that their country will never join the EU with the highest number in Serbia (35%), North Macedonia (27%) and BiH (21%), <https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/results/2/public>

⁷ Europe's Choice. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024–2029 https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf

⁸ Standard Eurobarometer 97 - Summer 2022, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=83434>.

Since then, support for including other countries in the future has dropped to 53% in Autumn 2024.⁹ The decreasing support is especially visible in Germany, where it dropped to 44% and those who oppose of the enlargement (51%) outweigh the supporters.¹⁰ In France and Austria, support for the enlargement remains the lowest among the member states (37% and 35% respectively).

Public debate on the consequences of enlargement (or non-enlargement) is lacking across the EU and the process is usually presented from the perspective of costs and burdens, contributing to the skepticism towards admitting new members. A well-informed public debate about the intended results of the process aimed to widen the area of security and stability based on European values, as well as the real cost and benefits for the citizens stemming from enlargement, is needed to build support for the process among the EU's societies.

In the time of geopolitical crisis, taking the bold decision and breaking the taboo of granting the Eastern Neighbourhood countries the prospect of membership was a significant sign that the EU wants to rebuild its geopolitical position in the neighboring regions. However, it had no immediate consequences because it was based on an assumption that fulfilling the conditions for membership would take at least another decade. Moreover, the European Commission presented the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. The initiative was aimed not only to provide an incentive for the reforms in the candidate countries but also to prove that despite granting membership perspective to the countries of Eastern Neighbourhood, the Union still wants to be actively engaged in the Western Balkans and bring it closer to the EU. It was also a response to the expectations of the Friends of the Western Balkans group, i.e. Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, and Slovenia, which prioritize the integration of the EU's southeastern neighbors or advocate for balance approach towards countries in the Balkans and the Associated Trio.

However, the new Growth Plan is only vaguely linked to the enlargement process and conditionality under the accession negotiation. Additionally, the integration process of Albania, BiH and Montenegro was also pushed forward, in the case of the two former states even despite the stagnation in reforms concerning the rule of law. This can be interpreted as a signal that these steps were aimed rather at enhanced association agreement than full membership, which requires functioning democracy in the candidate countries.¹¹ However, only a credible and merit-based enlargement process can trigger democratic transformation and reform in neighboring countries. Therefore, restoring the credibility and effectiveness of the accession process is crucial to push the integration forward and widen the area of stability and prosperity. As for now, it is still to be achieved as the divisions among the member states considering basic issues in enlargement remain.

Deepening vs widening

While the opening of a debate by France and Germany on the EU reform was initially perceived as a signal of a true renewed commitment to the enlargement, currently, it is in some member states considered a time-consuming discussion overshadowing the challenge of adapting the enlargement policy to the new reality and making the aspiring countries enlargement-ready as quickly as possible. In Germany and France, politicians and experts push for a quick reform of the EU institutional system and some procedural changes with a view to future enlargement while deferring the very issue of admitting new members to an unspecified future: certainly at least until after 2029, when the current European

⁹ Standard Eurobarometer 102 - Autumn 2024, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=95656>.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ M. Emerson, EU Enlargement Issues for the Next Commission. SCEEUS Guest Commentary.

Commission's term comes to an end.¹² Both countries are also insisting on a strong link between enlargement and reform of the EU which can only further undermine the credibility of the process as the progress would depend not only on achievements in the reform process but also on the pace of the EU debate on internal reform.

Representatives of the Czech Republic¹³, Poland, Slovakia, Baltic States, Finland and Sweden¹⁴ consider enlargement as a priority and reflect on changes which would make this process more effective. Thus, there is growing suspicion in the countries of Central Europe that the discussion on enlargement is rather a pretext to advancing some changes in favour of big member states and not a real ambition to make the EU fit for the accession of new members.¹⁵ This position is based on an assumption that in current political reality – division among member states and weak governments in France and Germany pressured by the rising popularity of right-wing parties – combined with weak leadership in the EU, it is impossible to carry out a comprehensive institutional reform. There is, therefore, a high risk that member states would engage in a prolonged debate which would only bring more division in the EU as none of the candidates would be ready to join the EU and there would be no pressure to achieve any results. Poland, for example, already at the EU Council on December 18, 2023 made a statement underlining *that the revision of the Treaties in the current geopolitical context would weaken the unity of the European Union and divert our political energy from other pressing challenges. With political dynamics in member states difficult to predict, embroiling the EU in the arduous process of reforming the Treaties could lead to a serious crisis within the EU. It could also delay the accession of new countries on which we made significant commitments at the last European Council on December 14-15, 2023.*¹⁶

In this context, the last debate about the reform of the enlargement policy was prompted by France, who vetoed the opening of EU accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019. French President Emmanuel Macron argued that the enlargement process should be reformed, and the EU needed a new strategic vision of what it wanted to achieve.¹⁷ After two years of debates, the revised enlargement methodology was adopted, introducing a substantially different negotiations dynamic.¹⁸ However, it caused unnecessary delays in the enlargement process and a loss of the positive momentum, previously created by the signing of the Prespa Agreement between Greece and North Macedonia and the latter agreeing to change its name. Moreover, it is also perceived as a sign that the EU, despite the geopolitical crisis in its neighbourhood, is still inward-looking and preoccupied primarily with its own problems, one of the reasons of the stagnating integration of the Western Balkans countries since 2008.

Countries favouring progress on enlargement over internal reform are not necessarily against the latter but they underline that the EU has been rather adjusting to the forthcoming enlargements than reforming according to a given timeframe or plan. They also underline that both processes should go

¹² Interview with German expert, Brussels 23th November, 2023

¹³ Interview with Czech Republic diplomat, Brussels 20th November, 2023.

¹⁴ Anonymous Interview, Brussels 21st November, 2023.

¹⁵ Such argumentation was present during Europe Future Forum organized on 16 – 18 September in Warsaw during the panels devoted to the EU enlargement and EU internal reforms.

¹⁶ [Adam Szałpka, BMUE.4620.1.2024, Warszawa, 8.01.2024 \[Official Response to MP's interpellation\]](https://www.gov.pl/attachment/cc883cc4-7910-4c5a-b2ba-e7a2d21977e3)
<https://www.gov.pl/attachment/cc883cc4-7910-4c5a-b2ba-e7a2d21977e3>

¹⁷ R. Emmott, F. Guarascio, M. Penetier, France under fire for 'historic error' of blocking Balkan EU hopefuls,
<https://www.reuters.com/article/world/france-under-fire-for-historic-error-of-blocking-balkan-eu-hopefuls-idUSKBN1WX1CW/>

¹⁸ A. Dimitrova, Dilemmas of EU Enlargement: Geopolitics, Conditionality, and Citizens' Concerns,
<https://www.sieps.se/fit-for-35-forum/dilemmas-of-eu-enlargement--geopolitics-conditionality-and--citizens-concerns/>

in parallel and should not be intertwined or dependent on each other.¹⁹ They also suggest that the discussion on EU internal reform should focus on the adaptation of the EU policies to current challenges (and the enlargement in the future), not institutional architecture. Adam Szłapka, Polish Minister for the European Union, presented the position of the government on this issue: *When we talk about reforming the European Union from Poland's perspective, we only talk about the policies, because we are not interested in institutional reform.*²⁰

What is the goal?

The discussion on EU decision-making, the number of Commissioners and Members of the European Parliament, as well as other institutional and procedural aspects, is also dispensable at that point when the outcome of the enlargement process in terms of full membership is still unclear. In the view of stagnated reform and stalled accession process of the Western Balkans, several models have been discussed in the EU (mainly among the expert community) to create new incentives for the candidate countries to push for comprehensive reforms and deepen their integration with the EU. The dominant models are: integration into the Single Market, staged accession and gradual integration.

Already in 2020, the European Commission proposed in the new methodology for the accession negotiations to accelerate the integration of the countries aspiring to join the Union through “phasing-in” to the individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programs and increasing funding and investment available for these countries.²¹ That suggestion was aimed at creating tangible intermediate goals that would encourage these countries to conduct the required reforms, as the membership is too distant a goal to motivate the political elites to do so.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought forward a reflection on the new approach to enlargement policy. In its conclusions of 23 June 2022, the European Council requested further advancement of the gradual integration between the EU and the Western Balkans region already during the enlargement process itself in a reversible and merit-based manner²² and tasked the European Commission with creating a proposal of other areas where deepening of sectoral cooperation with other countries would be possible.

In line with this concept, the European Commission presented the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans for 2024-2027, accompanied by the Reform and Growth Facility worth €6 billion (of which €2 billion is grants and €4 billion is loans) adopted by the Council and the European Parliament in May 2024.²³ Financial incentives aim to accelerate domestic governance and economic reforms and accelerate the integration of the candidate states into the Single European Market. The access to financial offers will depend upon the fulfillment of conditions specified in the Reform Agenda of individual countries.

¹⁹ Anonymous Interview, 16th of September 2024, Warsaw; Minister ds. Unii Europejskiej: rozszerzenie Unii nie może stać się zakładnikiem jej wewnętrznych reform, PAP 22.05.2024, <https://www.portalsamorzadowy.pl/polityka-i-spoleczenstwo/minister-ds-unii-europejskiej-rozszerzenie-unii-nie-moze-stac-sie-zakladnikiem-jej-wewnetrznych-reform,545939.html?mp=promo>

²⁰ Minister ds. Unii Europejskiej..., op.cit.

²¹ European Commission, DG NEAR, Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans, February 2020, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enhancing-accession-processcredible-eu-perspective-western-balkans_en

²² Conclusions of 24 June 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/57442/2022-06-2324-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>

²³ Regulation (EU) 2024/1449 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1449/oj>

The Commission identified seven initial priority areas of integration into the Single Market, i.e. access to the Single Euro Payment Area (SEPA), Digital Single Market, free movement of goods and free movement of services and workers. Moreover, in its Communication from 20 March 2024,²⁴ the Commission reflected on the possibilities of pre-accession inclusion of the candidate countries in various working formats, institutions, programs and sectoral policies, such as EU security and defense initiatives and Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), green agenda, energy, transport, or industrial policy. The specific areas are to be identified in terms of interest and mutual benefit.

These initiatives envision simultaneous (gradual) inclusion into the Single Market and gradual integration into other sectoral policies. Gradual integration is a catchy but still very vague concept, which is most commonly used in reference to sectoral, institutional and financial integration during the pre-accession period.²⁵ This new approach can introduce a positive dynamic to the enlargement process if properly implemented and combined with strict conditionality. However, at the same time, there are several risks that can impede reform and integration progress.

First of all, the Growth Plan and Reform Agenda are only loosely connected with the conditions set up under the formal accession process for opening and closing chapters grouped into clusters. That creates an impression of a separate track, parallel to formal enlargement methodology²⁶ aimed at integration into the Single Market only. Secondly, as the end goal of the process, namely the full membership, is still vague and uncertain, the phasing-in approach is dangerously similar to the integration à la carte concept.²⁷ This approach was for years the preferred model by the Western Balkan political leaders reluctant to introduce reform in the areas of rule of law and democratic governance and interested mainly in economic cooperation (and benefits) in very specific sectors. Third, despite the general statement that gradual integration into the Single Market and sectoral integration will follow the conditionality principle, according to the opinion of the Court of Auditors, the conditions are not ambitious enough and progress will be hard to measure as there are no specific indicators or methodology for assessing them.²⁸ Last but not least, these initiatives only increase the confusion as regards what is the aim of the whole process – the ultimate accession to the EU or enhanced cooperation in the different areas.

²⁴ Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews, COM(2024) 146, Brussels, 20.3.2024 final https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/926b3cb2-f027-40b6-ac7b-2c198a164c94_en?filename=COM_2024_146_1_EN.pdf

²⁵ J. Juzová, Gradual Integration Process: Towards Restoring Effectiveness And Credibility Of EU Enlargement, November 2023, Europeum, <https://www.europeum.org/wp-content/uploads/gradual-integration-process-towards-restoring-effectiveness-and-credibility-of-eu-enlargement-1.pdf>

²⁶ M. Emerson, S. Blockmans EU Adopts Negotiating 'Frameworks' for Ukraine and Moldova: The Starting Gun for the Accession Process, 05 July 2024, SCEEUS, <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/sceeus/2024-publications/eu-adopts-negotiating-frameworks-for-ukraine-and-moldova.pdf>

²⁷ S. Blockman, Gradual EU integration: limits to an à la carte approach, 24 April 2024, SIEPS, <https://www.sieps.se/en/fit-for-35-forum/gradual-eu-integration-limits-to-an-a-la-carte-approach/>

²⁸ Opinion 01/2024 concerning the proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, European Court of Auditors, https://www.eca.europa.eu/ECAPublications/OP-2024-01/OP-2024-01_EN.pdf

South versus

The countries in the Friends of the Western Balkans group are strong proponents of the gradual integration concept and inclusion of countries of the Western Balkans in different EU sectoral policies. They advocated for a clear agenda for gradual and accelerated integration in the Göttweig Declaration from June 2023.²⁹ and a joint letter to the head of European diplomacy Kaja Kallas and the Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos.³⁰ They also pushed for deeper cooperation in the field of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and invitation of the representatives of the Western Balkans to the meetings of the various institutional formats in the EU. The statements of the group³¹ (the Czech Republic is an outlier here favoring a balanced approach to the candidates from the South and East³²) indicate that it aimed at deepening cooperation with Western Balkans countries at the expense of the Eastern Trio and seek for modification of the enlargement policy which would better address challenges of the integration of the countries in this region. Moreover, participation of the governing elites in the various EU formats without any conditions attached (especially concerning the rule of law or CSDP) will only give them additional legitimization from the Union's side and strengthen their positions vis-à-vis NGOs and civil societies demanding democratic transformation in the process of EU integration.

On the other hand, discussions in countries such as Finland, Sweden, or the Baltic States reflect on the inclusion of security in the negotiating approach, i.e. by making integration in the defence field a priority and establishing a framework for providing Ukraine with security guarantees,³³ indicating their focus on candidates from the Eastern neighborhood. They also support gradual integration but rather in such areas as Common Security and Defense Policy and underline that such deepened cooperation should be conditional (i.e. dependent on alignment with CFSP), suggesting that the final goal should be full membership of the candidate countries in the Union.

Rule of Law Principle and Strict Conditionality

Most new initiatives aimed at accelerating the reform process in the Western Balkans ignore the fact that the lack of political will of the governing elites in the countries of the region is the main obstacle to quick integration. Although the general societal support for EU integration or for enhancing democratic government and rule of law is still very high, visible for example in the current mass protests in Serbia, the EU was in the past years reluctant to take into account the concerns of citizens and civil society organization in the candidate countries which were highlighting the democratic decline and eroding civil liberties.

²⁹ Göttweig Declaration by the "Friends of the Western Balkans", 23 June 2023, https://mzv.gov.cz/file/5114454/Friends_of_the_Western_Balkans_Gottweig_declaration_signed.pdf

³⁰ Friends of the Western Balkans: It's time for decisive progress in the region's Euro-integration, <https://europeannewsroom.com/friends-of-the-western-balkans-its-time-for-decisive-progress-in-the-regions-euro-integration/>

³¹ For example Göttweig Declaration adopted by the Group in June 2023 doesn't mention the Associated Trio at all and features proposal only for Western Balkans countries, https://mzv.gov.cz/file/5114454/Friends_of_the_Western_Balkans_Gottweig_declaration_signed.pdf

³² J. Juzová, The V4 and EU Enlargement. Advocates With Limited Influence?, December 2023, <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/Juzova%20-%20V4%20and%20enlargement%20-%20report.pdf>

³³ M. Matlak, M. Sus, Security and Eastern Enlargement: Bridging the Gap for Wartime EU Accession, EPC Policy Brief, 23 October 2024, https://www.epc.eu/content/Security_PB_v5.pdf

As scholars have pointed out, the EU unintentionally contributed to state capture in the Western Balkan countries through its policies.³⁴ It provides funds that allow ruling elites to consolidate their clientelist networks and supports strengthening the position of governments over other political and social actors, further entrenching their power. The EU also provided legitimacy to current leaders by engaging with them frequently while failing to openly criticize democratic decline. Furthermore, there was little progress on the enlargement path, as the EU did not demand substantial reforms. In some cases, even democratic backsliding did not lead to significant consequences.

The EU officials frequently underline that the EU accession is and remains based on fair and rigorous conditionality, the principle of own merit and concrete progress on the ground, in line with the ‘fundamentals first’ approach.³⁵ Under the new accession methodology, progress under the fundamentals cluster which includes Chapter 23 (judiciary and fundamental rights) and Chapter 24 (justice, freedom and security), determines the overall pace of negotiations.³⁶ However, it is not yet reflected in the EU’s policy towards the region. Instead, a long period of eroding and hesitant EU engagement in the Balkans has been combined with neglecting or ignoring democratic backsliding. That has made the political elites in these countries very reluctant to introduce the required reforms in the areas covered by the fundamentals cluster, as that would undermine their political positions. Although four countries from the Western Balkans were included in the EU’s internal Rule of Law Mechanism and the Rule of Law Report for the first time in 2024,³⁷ conclusions from these documents were not reflected in the Commission’s Enlargement Package reports or Growth Plan reform agendas.

In consequence, leaders of the Western Balkans hope that for the sake of showcasing success and progress in the EU integration of the region, the Union will still be lenient towards their democratic backsliding and the gradual integration model creates a framework enabling that. The EU’s conditionality is further undermined by individual member states - especially Hungary is very active in blocking any initiatives towards stricter conditionality in the fundamentals or in other aspects (for example making attendance of candidate countries at the EU meetings conditional on the level of alignment with the CFSP).³⁸ However, since the fundamentals are also cross-cutting in their nature, without independently functioning institutions and consolidation of the rule of law in the Western Balkans, the member states will be reluctant to admit them to the Single Market Area or substantially deepen sectoral integration.³⁹

For countries such as Poland⁴⁰, the Czech Republic⁴¹, the Baltic states but also Finland⁴² and Sweden⁴³, the main priority is to accelerate the reform process in the countries of both regions, especially in the area of rule of law and democratic governance in alignment with the official priorities of the EU’s enlargement policy.

³⁴ S. Richter, N. Wunsch, Money, power, glory. The linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans, *Journal of European Public Policy* 27 (1), 2020.

³⁵ Brussels, 20.3.2024 COM(2024) 146 final COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND THE COUNCIL

³⁶ EU accession process. Step by Step. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/eu_accession_process_clusters%20%28oct%202022%29.pdf

³⁷ 2024 Rule of law report - Communication and country chapters, https://commission.europa.eu/publications/2024-rule-law-report-communication-and-country-chapters_en

³⁸ Anonymus Interview. 15th of September, Warsaw.

³⁹ J. Juzová, Gradual Integration Process, op.cit.

⁴⁰ Interview with Polish diplomat, Warsaw, 16th of September, 2024.

⁴¹ Interview with Czech Republic diplomat, Brussels 20th November, 2023.

⁴² Interview with Finnish diplomat, Warsaw, 2nd of October, 2024.

⁴³ In April 2024 Sweden launched a high-level group that will provide expert support to Ukraine’s Government during its EU accession process consisting of representatives of Baltic States, Finland, Denmark and non-EU countries.

This position is partially supported by Belgium, the Netherlands and Denmark which consider strict conditionality in this area as a core of the enlargement policy, which cannot be weakened due to geopolitical needs. Most of these countries are ready to assist the candidate countries from both regions in the transformation process (through training programs, expert cooperation, know-how sharing etc.). For these EU member states, reforms in the area of fundamentals are crucial, regardless of what the aim of the enlargement process is – full membership or inclusion in the Single Market only.

Decision-making in the EU

In the past years, bilateral disputes and vetoes of the member states were one of the main reasons behind blockages in the enlargement process undermining its credibility and putting the EU's ability to reward merit into question. Some EU countries abused the unanimity requirement in the enlargement decision-making process to meet their national interests vis-à-vis candidates and other member states⁴⁴ or other domestic political agenda goals. That triggered a discussion around the possible introduction of qualified majority voting (QMV) and reduction of veto powers in the decision on enlargement. Contrary to this suggestion, in the past years, we have witnessed a rather stronger influence of bilateral disputes on the formal enlargement process and the inclusion of bilateral issues into the negotiation framework, as in the case of North Macedonia.

In January 2024, Germany and Slovenia presented a proposal to introduce qualified-majority voting in the intermediate stage of the accession process (opening of clusters), representing a very modest proposal to address the problem of misusing the enlargement process for national goals. Paradoxically, most countries belonging to the Friends of Western Balkans (and Hungary) are very reluctant to change the decision-making process as it gives them leverage and influence in the countries of the region. Poland and the Czech Republic have more nuanced positions on the issues. Both countries supported the introduction of QMV in enlargement at some point, but they are against its introduction in the other areas (i.e. CFSP) due to a lack of trust that their interest would be properly protected if unanimity is abandoned. Since in the current debates on internal reform, the introduction of the QMV in enlargement has been intertwined with its introduction in other areas and is perceived as a first step towards a more profound change in decision making in the EU, they are less likely to support this idea in the future.

This reluctance to QMV is also based on the conviction that the blockages in the enlargement process stemmed from a lack of true will within the EU to enlarge, encouraging different member states to block it. Therefore, they seek to build different ad-hoc coalitions to push the enlargement process forward and remove obstacles arising from bilateral disagreements with candidate countries. That strategy was quite effective during the Czech presidency in the European Council and enabled the achievement of several concrete results in the enlargement process.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Hungary threatened to veto Ukraine's accession if at least some of the EU funds for this country is unblocked. A. Sadecki, Orbán's blackmail: Hungary threatens to block Ukraine's integration with the EU, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2023-12-05/orbans-blackmail-hungary-threatens-to-block-ukraines-integration-eu>

⁴⁵ J. Juzová, The V4 and EU Enlargement. op.cit.

Is there a way forward?

Despite the general consensus on the geopolitical need of further enlargement, the member states are very divided in how the process should progress. The current lack of clarity and disagreement on the EU's enlargement policy makes it more and more difficult to promote reforms in the aspiring countries but also among societies of the member states. The process of the integration of the Eastern Trio and Western Balkans goes in parallel and advocates of either group argue for different approaches to the enlargement process. Almost three years of debates have brought no results in searching for a new *modus operandi*, which may result in losing of the momentum for rebuilding the transformative potential of the enlargement policy.

The new institutional cycle in the EU is a good opportunity for the new impetus in the area of enlargement as we have new leadership with Kaja Kallas and Marta Kos keen on merit-based and effective enlargement policy to both groups of countries – Western Balkans and the Associated Trio. They should focus on building consensus between the member states on how to move the process forward in favor of both groups of candidate countries. Continuation of the *business as usual* policy creates a risk of further destabilization in the Western Balkans, as we can observe with ongoing protests in Serbia, internal crisis in BiH and tension between Pristina and Belgrade. Moreover, Moldova and Ukraine can lose the motivation to implement reforms if the process gets stuck.

About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making. We are the recipient of institutional funding from the European Commission under the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme.



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