



Policy Paper



ADVANCING EU ENLARGEMENT BEYOND 2024: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

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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.



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Introduction

The year 2024 marked an important moment in the European Union's enlargement process, as it oversaw significant progress, particularly in the case of Ukraine, Moldova and Montenegro, but also persistent challenges in the case of certain countries. The first intergovernmental conference with Ukraine and Moldova was held in June, formally launching the accession negotiations with the two countries, which started with the bilateral screening process. Following the European Commission's recommendation, in March the EU leaders agreed in principle to open EU accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, once it would fulfil all conditions specified by the Commission. Montenegro achieved an important milestone on its EU accession path by closing interim benchmarks in key chapters 23 and 24, encompassing the 'fundamentals' of the accession process, after receiving a positive assessment in the Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) in June. The accession negotiations with Albania formally started in October by opening the first cluster on the fundamentals, a step previously blocked by Greece due to the arrest of the ethnic Greek mayor of the Albanian municipality of Himarë.¹

To encourage democratic reforms and economic convergence of the Western Balkans, the European Commission started the implementation of the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and most of the Western Balkan countries' reform agendas were adopted in 2024. These advancements demonstrated the EU's renewed priority attached to the enlargement process. Nevertheless, for the new dynamism in the EU enlargement to turn into a success story leading to countries

¹ Stamatoukou E., "Greece Threatens to Block Albania's EU Accession Over Arrested Mayor," *Balkan Insight*, 30 November 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/11/30/greece-threatens-to-block-albanias-eu-accession-over-arrested-mayor/>.

actually becoming new members of the Union, several serious challenges would need to be overcome.

These encouraging developments unfolded alongside troubling trends in other countries, including a marked autocratic and anti-European shift within Georgia's government after being granted candidate status. Democracy and the rule of law continued to face serious challenges in the majority of the Western Balkan countries. Furthermore, the stagnation of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue highlighted the persistent volatility in the region, threatening to undermine the broader enlargement agenda. Despite the eventual consensus among EU Member States to adopt negotiating frameworks for Ukraine and Moldova and to open the first negotiating cluster with Albania, both decisions were blocked for prolonged periods by individual Member States (Hungary in the case of Ukraine and Greece in the case of Albania). To avoid bilateral vetoes holding enlargement hostage in the future, Germany and Slovenia put forward a non-paper in the Council of the EU proposing the adoption of qualified majority voting in some intermediary stages of the process. The endeavour, however, hit a dead end as the proposal was not accepted by several Member States.²

This paper analyses the opportunities and challenges in advancing the EU enlargement process after 2024, explores the interlink between EU integration and democratization, enlargement and EU's internal reform, geostrategic interests and political transformation, and proposes a viable path forward for maintaining the EU's credibility and influence in the candidate countries.

² Parliament of Ireland (Oireachtas), Joint Committee on European Union Affairs, "Opening Statement of the Minister of State for European Affairs and Defence, Peter Burke, TD," 7 February 2024, p. 2, https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_european_union_affairs/submissions/2024/2024-02-07_opening-statement-peter-burke-t-d-minister-of-state-for-european-union-affairs-department-of-the-taoiseach_en.pdf.

Navigating enlargement and EU reform

As the enlargement process rose among the EU's priorities, the connected discussion emerged about changes that are necessary to prepare the Union and ensure its functioning also after accepting new members. Over the past years, some EU Member States suggested that a complex EU reform would be needed to allow for the next enlargement, adapting the Union's institutions, policies, and decision-making processes. The need to prepare both the candidates for membership and the EU for their accession was confirmed by the European Council in December 2023, stating also that these processes need to run in parallel.³

In March 2024, the European Commission published a Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews, outlining the necessary preparations for enlargement in four main areas – 1) *values* (guarantees of upholding rule of law by all EU member states), 2) *policies* (such as the Single Market, Common Agricultural Policy, cohesion policy or tax policy), 3) *budget* (reflection of enlargement in the next Multiannual Financial Framework), and 4) *governance* (EU institutional reforms).⁴ In June, the EU leaders adopted a roadmap for future work on internal reforms along these four strands, inviting the European Commission to provide in-depth policy reviews by spring 2025, which are to be discussed by the Council and progress reviewed by June 2025.⁵

³ European Council, "European Council conclusions, 14 and 15 December 2023," 15 December 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/68967/europeanconclusionconclusions-14-15-12-2023-en.pdf>.

⁴ European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews," 20 March 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/926b3cb2-f027-40b6-ac7b-2c198a164c94_en.

⁵ European Council, "Internal reforms of the EU," Last review: 1 August 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/internal-reforms-of-the-eu/#roadmap>.

While it is evident that substantial changes in the functioning of the institutions and the EU policies will be necessary to ensure its functioning with 30+ members, there is less agreement on how these changes should be achieved and whether the EU could accept new members without the completion of the reform. Currently, various EU member states have different positions on whether internal EU reforms should precede or accompany the accession of new member states and on the necessity of treaty changes versus more incremental reforms. While especially large EU member states favour internal reforms prior to enlarging the Union, especially as regards the streamlining of the decision-making processes, other countries strongly oppose immediate attempts for a treaty change, preferring instead exploring other, more gradual, options.⁶

The Czech Republic belongs traditionally among the strongest supporters of further enlargement, viewing it as an influential instrument to promote stability, democracy, and economic prosperity in Europe. The Czech representatives also repeatedly advocate against enlargement being preconditioned by the EU's internal reform, and the country is also among those member states opposing a treaty change, advocating for an incremental approach and making use of all possibilities under the current treaties first.⁷ However, a more nuanced discussion on how the existing options should be utilized to address different aspects of the needed pre-enlargement changes is missing in the Czech Republic so far, and the domestic discussions seem to focus just on the question of changes in the Council of the EU decision-making and possible loss of veto power in new areas.

⁶ "A third of EU countries oppose changing bloc's treaties," *Euractiv*, 9 May 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/a-third-of-eu-countries-oppose-changing-blocs-treaties/>.

⁷ Tvoříme Evropu, "Česko nechce měnit zakládající smlouvy EU, uvedl ministr Dvořák," 25 October 2023, <https://tvorimevropu.cz/2023/10/25/cesko-nechce-menit-zakladajici-smlouvy-eu-uvedl-ministr-dvorak/>.

Engaging more proactively in the reflections on the future functioning of the EU with more members represents an untapped potential for the country. The Czech Republic will be impacted by enlargement in multiple ways, including the effect enlargement will have on the redistribution of EU funds under cohesion policy or the actionability of the EU with more members in foreign policy on issues such as sanctions. The country has, over the past years, benefitted from a generally good image in the EU as a constructive and enlargement-supportive member, enhanced by its recent presidency of the Council of the EU in 2022. As previously elaborated by Czech experts,⁸ it would be in Czechia's interest to initiate a wider domestic discussion on the changes associated with enlargement and to engage proactively in the reflections on the shaping of the enlarged Union, especially in the light of the negotiations regarding the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

Gradual Integration: Opportunities and Pitfalls

Despite the new prominence of enlargement on the EU's agenda since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, structural and political issues potentially blocking the accession path of individual countries remain. Many of the candidate countries are caught in a spiral of democratic backsliding, each step of the complex accession process depends on a consensus among all 27 EU members, and stalling of the process – at times due to vetoes by individual EU member states – led to

⁸ Janebová P., Kazlauskas V., "Having our cake and eating it too? European Union and Czechia getting ready for enlargement," September 2024, Association for International Affairs, https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/AMO_EU_and_CZ_Getting_Ready_for_Enlargement.pdf?utm

Faktor Ž., Juzová J., "Kulatý stůl Národního konventu o EU na téma 'Balkán, Turecko či Ukrajina: Budoucnost politiky rozšiřování v kontextu institucionálního nastavení,'" 27 May 2024, <https://www.europeum.org/wp-content/uploads/stanovisko-narodni-konvent.pdf>. Tvoříme Evropu, "Doporučení Národního konventu o EU: Budoucnost politiky rozšiřování v kontextu institucionálního nastavení," 1 July 2024, <https://tvorimevropu.cz/2024/07/01/doporuzeni-narodniho-konventu-o-eu-budoucnost-politiky-rozsirovani-v-kontextu-institucionalniho-nastaveni/>.

growing scepticism of the Western Balkan citizens about the EU and their accession prospects. The gradual integration approach, ingrained in the enhanced enlargement methodology in 2020 and advanced also during the Czech Republic's presidency of the Council of the EU, has emerged as a potential solution to these challenges.

The implementation of gradual integration presents a practical way how to deepen the candidates' integration with the European Union, offering them concrete benefits, even in a situation when full membership is hindered by political obstacles in the process. This approach has the potential to enhance the candidate countries' alignment with EU standards throughout the lengthy accession negotiations leading to full membership.

Over the last few years, there have been several examples of increased integration of the Western Balkans and Associated Trio with the EU under the gradual integration approach. The most complex manifestation so far is the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans,⁹ with the first pillar offering gradual integration into the EU's single market across seven priority areas. The candidate countries also have been included in numerous EU programmes, connectivity initiatives (for example decreasing of roaming charges or linking the countries with the TEN-T network) and other existing EU mechanisms, such as the annual Rule of Law report which now includes alongside the EU member states also the most advanced EU candidate countries.

However, this approach is not without its pitfalls. While it allows for closer economic and political ties in a shorter time span, it does not guarantee the

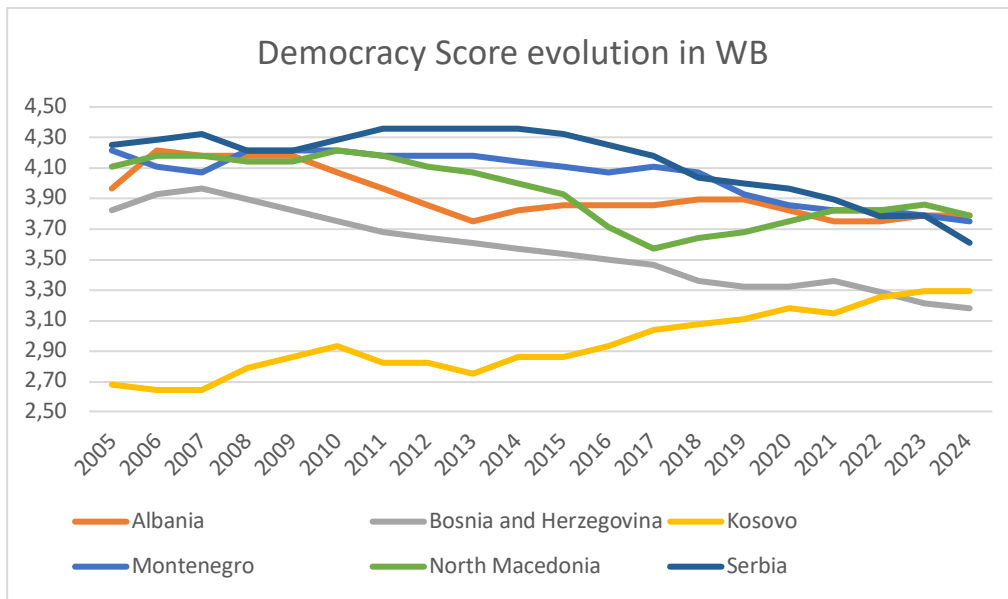
⁹ European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: New growth plan for the Western Balkans," 8 November 2023, https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8f5dbe63-e951-4180-9c32-298cae022d03_en?filename=COM_2023_691_Ne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

ultimate goal of full membership, creating the fear of getting “stuck” only at a certain level of integration beneficial for the EU. The gradual integration approach and the demands it puts on the institutional capacities of the candidate countries potentially pose the risk of diluting the efforts otherwise directed towards the formal accession negotiations. Furthermore, the possibility of faster integration into the EU’s single market is not as straightforward as it might seem.¹⁰ It puts increased pressure on the competitiveness of the candidates’ production vis-à-vis those of EU member states, requires strict alignment with the EU standards, creating additional costs for producers for necessary alignment with EU regulations, and is closely interlinked with the question of the rule of law guarantees in each state and also with the mandate of the European Court of Justice in case of conflicts among the countries.

Last but not least, unless combined with a strict conditionality, the gradual integration benefits could be misused by leaders of some of the candidate countries who are not interested in democratic pro-European reforms to reach certain benefits without advancing the reform process substantially. This risk is pronounced currently mainly in the case of the Western Balkan countries that, over the past years, consistently underperform in areas such as the rule of law, judiciary independence, electoral integrity, media freedom, and civil society position.¹¹

¹⁰ Becker P., Lippert B., “Acceding Countries’ Gradual Integration into the EU Single Market,” Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 2024, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/acceding-countries-gradual-integration-into-the-eu-single-market>.

¹¹ Freedom House, Nations in Transit Index, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit>.



Graph 1: Freedom House, Nations in Transit reports 2005-2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit>. Data was collected and visualized by the author.

Despite the outlined risks and open questions under the gradual integration approach, it still represents the most feasible way how to advance the integration of the candidates with the EU, boost their socio-economic convergence with the Union, motivate democratic reforms, build up their institutional capacities, and establish trust between them and the EU member states amidst the reality of an increasingly politicized enlargement process. To maximize the benefits and mitigate these pitfalls, the EU has to support the gradual integration with a clear and credible pathway to full membership, hand in hand with a strict conditionality. Enhanced monitoring and conditionality (including the readiness to apply the reversibility principle in the case of democratic backsliding), coupled with clear timelines and tangible benchmarks, are essential to preserving the integrity and effectiveness of the enlargement process.

The Way Forward: Reconciling Geostrategic Imperatives and Democratic Reforms

In light of the dynamic changes in the international arena with Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, China evolving into a "systemic rival" of the EU, and the unpredictability of the consequences of the second Trump administration for transatlantic relations, the geopolitical and geostrategic considerations are at the forefront of the EU enlargement discussions. The question that naturally arises is how these imperatives and the need of acceleration in the enlargement process are compatible with the demand for substantial democratic transformation underpinning the EU accession path of the candidates. On one hand, the geopolitical realities necessitate a faster pace of enlargement to counteract external influences and reinforce stability in the region. On the other hand, the democratization and quality of reforms remain fundamental to ensuring that new members uphold the EU's core values and do not undermine the functioning of the Union after their accession.

The Western Balkans' experience highlights the gaps in the democratizing effect of EU integration and the failures of the EU's enlargement policy. Despite decades of EU engagement, the region has witnessed a decline in democratic standards, raising concerns about the effectiveness of the enlargement process (see Graph 1). The stagnation of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue further demonstrates the limitations of EU-mediated negotiations in addressing deep-seated political and ethnic tensions present in the region. Similarly, the shift toward pro-Russian and anti-EU stances of Georgia under the Georgian Dream party rule signals the potential for political backsliding even as countries move closer to EU membership in other regions than the Western Balkans.

Addressing these challenges requires a rethinking of the EU's approach to enlargement. Enhanced conditionality and monitoring mechanisms need to be

coupled with greater support for democratic reforms and civil society engagement. The rule of law and democratic conditionality, however, must not be limited to the accession process – the experience from some EU member states demonstrates the importance of post-accession conditionality for the protection of the Union’s values. Enhanced conditionality instruments towards newly acceded EU members and EU-wide mechanisms, including financial implications in case of democratic backsliding and rule of law deficiencies, can help to ensure that geostrategic objectives do not come at the expense of democratic standards.

Key elements of the new approach aimed at restoring the credibility and transformative power of EU enlargement include:

1. **Clear conditionality and timelines:** The EU must uphold a merit-based methodology combining clear conditionality and well-defined timelines. Examples such as the visa liberalization process demonstrate the effectiveness of setting concrete incentives and deadlines to achieve accountability and progress. By providing candidate countries with clear roadmaps, the EU can enhance the predictability and credibility of the enlargement process. The reform agendas under the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans can serve as an opportunity to test this new approach, with the specified indicators and timelines.
2. **Enhanced communication and public engagement:** To counter the mistrust towards the EU among the citizens in candidate countries and build public support for European integration, the EU must significantly boost its communication targeted towards them. Partnerships with civil society organizations can amplify the EU’s efforts and ensure that the benefits of integration are understood and appreciated at the grassroots level. A more robust engagement is crucial in addressing misinformation and fostering trust in the EU.
3. **Strengthened monitoring and democracy support:** Enhanced monitoring mechanisms and strict conditionality should be complemented by targeted support for democratic reforms. By enhancing the provided technical and financial assistance, the EU can help candidate countries address structural weaknesses and build the capacity needed for successful integration.

4. **Balancing geostrategic priorities and democratic standards:** The EU must strike a balance between the urgency of a 'geopolitical' enlargement and the need for robust democratic reforms in the candidate countries. This requires a more tailored approach that recognizes the unique challenges and opportunities of each candidate country, strict pre-accession conditionality (both positive and negative in case of backsliding), a credible commitment to enlargement from all stakeholders in the EU, and new tools to ensure the rule of law conditionality also after accession to the Union.
5. **Learning from the past:** Finally, the EU must draw lessons from previous enlargement rounds to avoid repeating past mistakes. The quality of reforms during the accession process and creativity with the use of existing and new conditionality mechanisms are essential in ensuring that the rule of law and democracy standards are respected in an enlarged Union. The benefits and costs of EU enlargement need to be proactively communicated to the citizens, both in the candidate countries and in the EU member states, to inform them adequately, manage their expectations, and highlight the long-term positive impacts of the previous enlargement rounds.