



Report



# TRANSFORMING WORDS INTO ACTION. HOW TO KEEP CURRENT MOMENTUM IN EU ENLARGEMENT?

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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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***On 3<sup>rd</sup> of October, Think Visegrad in Brussels represented by the Brussels Office of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy organized an expert discussion titled "Transforming words into action. How to keep current momentum in EU enlargement?". Various experts from EU institutions, think tanks and Member states' representations participated in an exchange on how to advance in the area of EU enlargement policy.***

*Over the past two years, both expert and public discourse have increasingly emphasized the need to capitalize on the momentum created as a consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine to reopen the debate on accelerating the European Union's enlargement process. The invasion served as a catalyst for renewed focus on the EU's immediate neighbors, placing enlargement back at the forefront of political priorities as the Union transitions into its next parliamentary term. This renewed focus has already led to tangible advancements, including the initiation of accession negotiations, the formulation of new strategies and financial incentives for candidate states, and reinforced commitments from the EU, such as the appointment of a Commissioner for Enlargement. **Key challenge moving forward is ensuring that this momentum is sustained and translated into concrete, transformative actions that deliver measurable results.** The success of these efforts will depend on the ability of the EU to maintain political will and align its institutional and financial frameworks with the ambitious goals of enlargement.*

To kick off the debate, **acceleration of the EU integration process was repeatedly mentioned by the speakers.** This is closely tied to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has revived strategic thinking in the debate. A credible enlargement perspective can only be achieved through a merit-based approach. This prevents the process from being misused or politicized, particularly by member states blocking candidate countries, as has been seen in recent years.

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At present, EU institutions appear to be the main driving force pushing the integration process forward. In contrast, the position of member states remains more complex. While there is a clear inclination toward progressing in accession negotiations, it is uncertain how long this momentum will last.

The timing appears favorable with the new European Commission set to take office, initiating a fresh institutional cycle. **The negotiation**

**frameworks with Ukraine and Moldova have been adopted**, and we may soon see the opening of negotiation clusters with both countries, as well as the closing of chapters with Montenegro. However, it is crucial to consider not only the enlargement itself but also the challenges posed by candidate countries, particularly Ukraine as the future of Ukraine's EU integration is heavily influenced by external factors. In light of these challenges, it can be expected that the Polish EU Presidency in the first half of 2025 will prioritize stability and continued support for Ukraine.

In this context, it is essential to emphasize that **EU enlargement remains the Union's most effective transformative tool**. If the enlargement process loses momentum and candidate states, especially Ukraine or Moldova are neglected, the long-term costs including a loss of confidence in the EU will be far greater than what is currently observed in the Western Balkans. Ensuring that momentum is sustained is therefore critical to both the future of candidate countries and the credibility of the EU's enlargement policy.

In addition to the risks posed by a stalled enlargement process, another key topic discussed at the event was the lack of **emphasis on the foreign influence of other states, particularly the Russian Federation, whose destabilizing activities are of great concern.** The Western Balkans and Eastern Europe have effectively become battlegrounds in Russia's geopolitical conflict with the EU. This is further exacerbated by the growing influence of China. **Serbia was highlighted as a key example** of how these two countries employ different strategies to expand their influence. Russia's influence in Serbia is deeply institutionalized, manifested through cooperation in defense, foreign affairs, intelligence operations, and, to some extent, support for Russia's broader geopolitical agenda.

Russia's primary objective in the region is to **disrupt the EU's long-term strategic goals by exploiting vulnerabilities and destabilizing states**, thereby threatening the security of the EU as a whole. China, on the other hand, pursues **more strategic,**

**economically-driven goals.** China's influence is largely exerted through long-term investment projects and capital infusions, forming cooperative ties with these countries. While these economic interventions do not pose an immediate threat in the eyes of the EU, they are often underestimated. **By projecting economic influence, China gains leverage in future EU member states, potentially securing access to the EU market via these countries.** At present, the EU lacks concrete mechanisms to effectively counter Russia's influence in the region. This underscores the need for a more tailored, country-specific approach by the EU toward both Russia and China.

Building on this point, the debate also raised the question of whether the EU is genuinely capable of offering a credible accession path to the Western Balkans, a region beset by skepticism and disappointment after two decades of stalled

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progress, and in contrast to high expectations for Ukraine. **One of the main obstacles to EU enlargement remains the bilateral disputes between EU member states and candidate countries.** Amid rising nationalism, political instability within the EU, and the fact that the Council must unanimously approve the integration of new members, minor issues can stall the process and lead to growing frustrations as witnessed in several cases with the Western Balkan candidates.

The European Commission and other EU institutions are actively exploring ideas for an accelerated integration plan to advance the Western Balkan countries' EU accession. A significant shift in the EU's relationship with the Western Balkans came in 2023 with the European Commission's adoption of the **New Growth Plan**, designed to accelerate economic development in the region and bring Western Balkan partners closer to the EU. This plan offers a portion of the benefits of EU membership even before formal accession, with promising initiatives such as the integration of the **Single European Payments Area** and the abolition of interim fees—attractive prospects for candidate states. However, various studies point out that substantial economic and administrative barriers still hinder full integration into the EU internal market. The European Commission's 2023 assessment similarly highlighted that the Western Balkans' readiness in terms of market conditions remains relatively low, with most areas still at an early stage of development. While accelerated integration into the internal market could offer short-term benefits, there is concern that it may complicate the overall accession process in the long term.

On the divisive issue of shifting EU enlargement decision-making from unanimity to **qualified majority voting** (QMV), there is ongoing debate. Introducing QMV during the transitional phases of enlargement would require the establishment of alternative mechanisms to address bilateral disputes between member states and candidate countries. Politically, this is more complex, as some member states are



linking the issue to broader EU reform discussions, such as the potential for QMV in security policy. Importantly, unanimity is still required to enact this change, and some member states have used their veto power in the past to block accession, as seen with Bulgaria's veto of North Macedonia, Greece's objections to Albania, and Hungary's stated intention to block Ukraine. This makes it unlikely that a political consensus on moving to QMV for enlargement decisions will be reached in the near future, unless it is part of a broader package of EU reforms.

With Poland set to assume the Presidency of the European Union Council on January 1, 2025, it will have the opportunity to shape the direction of EU policy, particularly in the area of enlargement. Poland and other Central European countries have consistently supported Ukraine's EU candidacy, having been among the first to advocate for this status in February 2022. While there is optimism, challenges are expected, particularly concerning specific chapters of the accession process, such as agriculture and transport. Protests from sectors like farming and trucking in countries like Poland signal growing pressure as Ukraine could become a competitor in these areas. Meanwhile, growing concerns about Serbia's drift away from its EU path highlight the urgent need for the EU to

reassess its strategy toward Serbia. **The EU's**

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**involvement in resolving the Serbia-Kosovo dispute is crucial.** For the EU to truly prioritize the Western Balkans, it must work with member states that have yet to **recognize Kosovo, as the enlargement process cannot move forward without addressing this issue.**

The trust between Serbia's current government and the EU is fragile and largely transactional, unlike the stronger relationships the EU enjoys with North Macedonia or Albania, countries which are demonstrating significant progress.

A couple of experts also draw attention to the challenges faced by civil society organizations in the region, highlighting Serbia as a case study, where state actors are reportedly engaged in systematic harassment of civil society members, exacerbating already difficult conditions. **Experts emphasized the insufficient support provided to civil society organizations across the region, both domestically and from EU delegations.** This observation underscores a critical gap in the EU's external engagement strategy, raising questions about the effectiveness of its efforts to promote democratic governance and civil society resilience in candidate countries.

Lastly, the participants discussed the impact of future enlargement(s) on the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as these countries currently benefit from the EU budget while the EU membership also boosted their economic growth through the access to EU single market. In Poland, as well as in other countries within the region, there is growing attention on the broader implications of EU enlargement, particularly in relation to institutional reforms and the need to adapt the decision-making process. The *Lisbon Treaty* is central to these discussions, as it sets the framework for how the EU operates. Additionally, Central and Eastern European countries are paying closer attention to policies such as cohesion policy, agricultural policy, and how the enlargement process should be integrated into the next *Multiannual Financial Framework*. This reflects a more strategic approach in thinking about how future EU expansions can be managed to ensure stability and mutual benefits.