



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

European Dialogue

A LARGER AND REFORMED EUROPEAN UNION #EU30+

Getting ready for EU enlargement



POSITION PAPER

Publication Credits

Published by

Friedrich Naumann Foundation
for Freedom
Truman Haus
Karl-Marx-Straße 2
14482 Potsdam-Babelsberg
Germany

 /freiheit.org

 /FriedrichNaumannStiftungFreiheit

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As of

June 2024

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Introduction

Following Russia's full-scale and brutal invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the EU has rediscovered its enlargement policy as a means of expansion in strategically important regions and has started to discuss its own internal reforms to allow for the accession of new members.

In March 2022, the EU recognised the membership perspective of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Since then, all three have become official candidates and the decision to start accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova was taken. This had a spillover effect for the Western Balkans, which had been on the EU path since 2003: the European Union decided to grant candidate status and start accession talks with Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2024.

In December 2023, the Council of the EU reaffirmed its commitment to enlargement.¹ To achieve this, the Council concluded that 'both the EU and future Member States need to be ready'. Candidates are expected 'to step up their reform efforts, notably in the area of rule of law, in line with the merit-based nature of the accession process and with the assistance of the EU'. In parallel, the Council concluded that 'the Union needs to lay the necessary internal groundwork and reforms'.

Against the backdrop of these significant developments and given the expectation that discussions about the EU's potential expansion and internal reforms will be an important part of the 2024 European elections,² a group of twenty experts came together for a workshop in Berlin, Germany, in early April 2024, to discuss the current state of play, challenges and opportunities in the EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans Six and the Eastern Trio.³

1 Council of the EU, 'Council conclusions on Enlargement', 12 December 2023.

2 See for example: ALDE, 'Your Europe, Your Freedom: Delivering Change for you', 20 March 2024.

3 Western Balkans Six: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Eastern Trio: Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. Note that Kosovo is a potential candidate and that Turkey is a candidate country with opened accession talks. Kosovo applied for EU membership in December 2022, while accession negotiations with Turkey are de facto frozen.

They also discussed what should be done, both in the EU itself and in the aspirant countries, to enable and foster the European Union's further expansion.

This position paper is based on the ideas discussed during this workshop. It is divided into three chapters. The first part takes a closer look at why EU enlargement matters for the European Union and the countries aspiring to join. The second part evaluates the support that the EU provides to the candidates. The third part considers the EU reforms needed to ensure that a European Union of 30+ members remains functioning.

1

Benefits of EU enlargement

The European Union is a historical peace project. If one looks at the map of Europe since the 1990s, two groups of countries emerge. The first includes the EU and single market countries, which either already enjoyed peace, stability and socio-economic prosperity or were offered the chance to catch up by becoming members. The second comprises countries from the Western Balkans, the Eastern Trio, Turkey, and the Caucasus, which have seen outbreaks of violence and lack of socio-economic development. For most aspirants, EU membership is therefore mainly about peace and stability.

The current aspirants are geographically, historically and culturally part of Europe and have been recognised as potential members of the EU. However, current debates and public perceptions of EU enlargement are often dominated by the potential negative repercussions for existing EU members. This narrative overlooks that EU enlargement and the accession process are beneficial for both the EU and aspirant countries, bringing security, political and economic advantages to all sides. This chapter will therefore concentrate on the benefits of the accession of these countries to the EU, thus adding a perspective that is often lacking or neglected in public debates.

1.1 Security benefits

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, a nuclear power, peace in Europe can no longer be taken for granted. The victory of Ukraine, as well as the prevention of an outbreak of conflicts in the Western Balkans and Moldova, has become key to **averting Russia's further assault on European security and political architecture**.

So far, enlargement policy has proven the best tool for the EU to promote security, democracy and prosperity beyond its borders. By bringing into its fold the **Western Balkans** region, which is neither

part of the EU nor the single market, the Union would **eliminate the only grey zone in its own inner courtyard**, consolidating its space of influence. With Ukraine, the EU would add a member with one of the strongest and most experienced armed forces. This would go hand in hand with the ongoing **development of the EU's defence market**. These are concrete benefits for all European citizens.

Another security benefit of enlargement is that EU policies and **standards in this policy area would extend their reach** to the benefit of existing and aspirant members alike. The implementation of EU policies on migration, security, as well as defence and foreign policy would be hindered without the inclusion of the Western Balkans, which are geographically in the EU's inner courtyard. The expansion of these policies and standards to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia would multiply their effects.

Lastly, it is also geopolitical considerations, such as the systemic rivalry with actors like China or Russia, that make enlargement necessary. However, lengthy accession processes without meaningful progress risk a shift away from pro-European development in aspirant countries. If the accession offer is not pursued seriously, the **EU's credibility in the aspirant countries** is put into question and its transformative power challenged. EU leverage rests on its attraction and its attraction rests on its credibility. If the offer of full EU membership is not pursued, **the EU's image as a global actor** is damaged.

1.2 Economic benefits

The EU membership perspective is not only of benefit to aspiring countries but also to the EU itself. The enlargement process strengthens the European Union, ensuring it continues to have control over its own reality and future.

Enlargement to the Western Balkans and the Trio would **expand the EU single market**, adding nine states with almost 70 million citizens where EU rules and standards would apply. These countries would be bound to join the Eurozone, which would be strengthened as a

result. In a world shifting towards a more diversified and multipolar system of several global currencies, **having more economies using the euro would also increase its international circulation**. This, in turn, would mean **lower costs and decreased risk of trading for European businesses**.

With Georgia, the EU would for the first time expand to the Caucasus region, an increasingly important **transport and energy hub**. By admitting Ukraine, the EU would also **become an agricultural superpower**. While it is true that, if the current budgetary rules were to apply, most agricultural subsidies would flow to Ukraine, it is highly likely that the next EU enlargement will lead to a reform of the EU budget. This would have concrete benefits for all European citizens (*see chapter 3*).

Enlargement would also help expand the reach of EU policy in the economic sector. The **implementation of policies related to the green and digital transitions** without the inclusion of the Western Balkans would weaken the results. Since the region is geographically within EU borders, any policies aimed at tackling pollution, for example, would have less effect without its inclusion. The expansion of these policies and standards to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia would reinforce the effectiveness of EU action.

One of the most recent priorities of the EU has been **to make itself as independent as possible when it comes to critical raw materials**. Many of the aspirant countries, such as Ukraine, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, have significant amounts of these materials. Inclusion of these aspirants in the EU and the extension of EU rules and standards to them would therefore greatly benefit the Union and its citizens.

1.3 Promotion of EU values

The European Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities (Article 2 of the Treaty on the EU).

The accession process allows the EU to have an impact on aspirants and helps it to further develop its own rules and standards. This presents a huge opportunity for the EU to continue **expanding the group of democratic states based on respect for the rule of law and human rights**. This is particularly important at a time when democracy is in retreat globally but also when democratic values and principles are under attack in the EU itself.

2

Supporting the aspirants

Over time and for a variety of reasons, the EU accession process has become stricter and more elaborate. No aspirant is now able to join the European Union without fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria and complying with a myriad of rigorous conditions and benchmarks to protect the integrity of the EU. To help aspirants fulfil the requirements for membership, the EU offers support in various ways.

2.1 Credible country reports

Each year, the European Commission assesses the level of preparedness of laws, institutions and policy implementation in all candidate countries with respect to six clusters and 33 chapters of the accession negotiations. These regular reports present the **most detailed and advanced source of evaluation of the aspirants' progress (or lack thereof)**. The Commission assesses each policy area (or chapter) according to five degrees of preparedness: early stage; some level of preparation; moderately prepared; good level of preparation; and well advanced.

The latest reports by the European Commission, published in November 2023, showed that none of the nine aspirants was anywhere close to being ready to join the EU. For them to meet the required level of preparedness in a reasonable time frame, both the EU and the candidates need to step up their efforts.

This is particularly important considering that the European Commission reports show that over the past five years, no EU aspirant from the Western Balkans has made any significant progress in the overall level of preparedness. Since 2022, when the Commission started to issue reports for the Eastern Trio, Ukraine and Moldova have advanced more than all six Western Balkan states and Georgia combined. While the progress made by Ukraine and Moldova are encouraging, the Commission's reports clearly show that they remain far behind most of the Western Balkan countries in their level of preparedness for accession.

The Commission's reports therefore work as an early warning system indicating when reforms are sufficient or insufficient. To be able to conduct such assessments, the Commission has introduced comparable methodology across all 33 chapters since 2015. This provides insights into progress (or backsliding) for each candidate over the years and allows for comparison between them. **The credibility of these reports needs to be preserved and strengthened**, for example, by further developing the benchmarks across the chapters.

2.2 Better investments

In early 2024, the EU adopted several new instruments aimed at providing new funding opportunities for candidates. The New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans foresees up to €6 billion of new funding (about €2 billion in grants and €4 billion in loans). This support comes in addition to up to €9 billion in grants already foreseen by the 2020–2027 Economic and Investment Fund Plan (the pre-accession funds). The plan envisions that the European Commission, together with the Western Balkan governments, will draw up individual socio-economic reform plans (which cover the fundamentals, i.e. the rule of law and democracy). The intention is that only **upon the implementation of the agreed reforms, funding will be made available**. Similar instruments are in place for the Eastern Trio.

It remains to be seen if this approach will prove effective in promoting reforms. Critics have pointed out that the size of the pot is ultimately too small for candidates to be sufficiently motivated to meet sensitive and costly EU conditions. Moreover, money alone has rarely produced sustainable results. Some have also cautioned about the rule of law weakness and corruption challenges in these countries, which could negatively affect the way in which the funds are spent. The key is **to extend the role of the European Public Prosecutor or to create an equivalent body/position specifically for candidate countries**.

Moreover, to incentivise reforms in the Western Balkans and Georgia, which have seen some considerable backsliding, and to maintain the reform momentum in Ukraine and Moldova, the EU should consider **greater investment in core public infrastructure and connectivity, with a special emphasis on improving electrical and transportation systems**. Such initiatives would produce tangible benefits for citizens in these countries, motivating them and their leaders to push through difficult reforms.

The lack of coordination of infrastructure projects across countries is also problematic. If roads built with EU funds in one country do not extend into the neighbouring states, the positive effect of such projects is limited. Finally, since most of the money comes in the form of loans, it will effectively be 'recycled' back to the EU, which risks maintaining or widening the convergence gap between the aspirants and the Member States, as opposed to narrowing and eventually closing it.

2.3 Capacity building and pre-accession funds

To support the aspirants, the EU should provide capacity building, for example, by helping to **professionalise public administration and develop governance**.

One way to achieve this would be to **allocate increased financial and technical support for candidate countries** when it comes to difficult and more demanding policy areas (such as the environment). Twinning and TAIEX programmes should also be re-evaluated, and the **local level should be more systematically sponsored**. The local private sector, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and independent media groups need far more attention and support from the EU than is the case at present.

In addition, **financial backing should be decentralised**: the money stream should not flow only through the central government if it is to reach further into society. To this end, civil society forces in particular, which play a special role in the democratic development of

the candidate countries, should be more closely involved in the accession process and directly supported by EU pre-accession aid.

Finally, **specialised EU-related education of public servants** is key both during and after accession. If the EU established an Erasmus+ Programme for civil servants, it would make a great difference in this respect.

2.4 Anti-backsliding policy and measures

As seen in some of the Western Balkan aspirants, as well as in Georgia, reforms can stall and backslide. In response to such developments, in the past several years, the EU has introduced different measures and sanctions against various third countries, including some of the aspirants. For example, it suspended funds for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo and stopped/deferred high-level political meetings with Kosovo.

So far, such responses have been adopted in an ad-hoc manner and often not on a fair basis. One of the most prominent examples of measures not being seriously considered was in Serbia after the violent Banjska incident in north Kosovo in September 2023 and following the December 2023 election events.

The **EU should clarify its anti-backsliding policy and measures for aspirants** by developing a more robust package of measures/sanctions and by clearly spelling out its red lines. This should then be communicated to candidates, as well as domestically to citizens in the EU Member States.

2.5 Gradual integration

To **motivate positive competition among candidates**, the EU has in the past pushed for **gradual integration into the EU** (e.g. the Energy Community and Transport Community). The EU should further explore such options.

While anti-backsliding policy and measures for candidates can be helpful in achieving long-term and sustainable reforms, positive incentives are key. The EU has already taken decisions to explore and offer gradual integration to aspirants. This approach should be further clarified and developed, for example, by developing specific tailor-made roadmaps for gradual integration into the Single Market, EU funding and EU institutions.

One step in the right direction is that aspirants are now included in some of the EU programmes. The European Commission, following a proposal by the European Parliament, should **review all existing EU programmes with a view to identifying ways in which candidate countries can be further included in them**. Furthermore, all new programmes developed for the Member States should be drafted with the candidate countries in mind and be accessible to them.

The EU should prioritise offering guarantees of **equal opportunities for educational institutions** in all candidate countries, comparable to those associated with the Erasmus+ Programme. The same goes for programmes that foster **engagement with the youth** in aspirant countries.

2.6 Standing task forces

Modelled on the Standing Task Force for the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, the EU should establish a **standing task force for all candidate countries**, with the aim of using all possible avenues to further their integration into the EU.

The goal would be to build effective bridges and synergies between all the programmes and initiatives, initiated either by the EU or the candidates and promoting accession-related reforms. Consisting of a designated unit of **country specialists within the European Commission**, such a task force would serve as a direct daily coordination centre. It would work closely with the EU delegations on the ground, ministries, administrative bodies, civil society, and the like. This type of hands-on involvement and collaboration with the candidate countries would help to unite forces and pool the resources of all relevant actors, multiplying the effect of EU support.

2.7 The Western Balkans-Eastern Trio platform

The EU and aspirant countries should work to increase the level of **exchange between the Western Balkans and the Eastern Trio**, starting with civil society organisations and civil servants.

So far, the Western Balkans and the Eastern Trio have mostly been on separate integration tracks. Due to geographic distance, there is a need for more structural exchange between the two groups of aspirants. This could then positively impact the speed and quality of reforms in the enlargement countries. A good start would be a platform or forum to coordinate civil society and public servants, where they could **exchange best practices and lessons learned** and look for joint solutions to common challenges in the EU integration process.

2.8 Public support for EU enlargement

Without public support, no new enlargement will take place. To achieve enlargement, European institutions and Member States, as well as political leaders and civil society, will need to invest in communication and public debates with Europeans about the benefits of enlargement and the costs of non-enlargement. This will inevitably lead to re-thinking how we talk about the EU and will promote a better understanding of the European Union among its citizens.

If **heavy-weight politicians** with a good reputation inject political capital into fostering a **better understanding and acceptance of enlargement**, the media is also more likely to become interested in covering the subject, thus helping to amplify positive messages about the policy. Political leaders should also consider organising citizens' participation events at all levels of government in the EU, where citizens can deliberate on enlargement. To date, experience with participatory democracy at national and EU level suggests that **it can help to raise public awareness and interest in the topics discussed and can inspire proposals for action that may be even more ambitious than those of decision-makers**. Citizens' input and buy-in are crucial as the EU contemplates expanding to 30+ members, with all the complex and often costly implications of that process.

3 Reforming the EU

For the EU to enlarge, some level of internal reform and adaptation will be needed. The proposals discussed so far address two major areas, one concerning decision-making and the other the budget. The aim of internal EU reform is to ensure that the European Union remains functioning and efficient despite the larger number of Member States and even more diverging views and interests around the decision-making table.

3.1 Modernised and inclusive decision-shaping process

Any agreement on more far-reaching institutional changes, which would include treaty reforms, seems highly unlikely. This is why the EU should focus on what is possible within the current system and opt for smaller steps in the right direction.

Related to enlargement, Member States should explore the possibility of **introducing qualified majority voting for intermediate decisions in the accession process**. The practice of unanimity for approving all the intermediary steps of the accession process and politically motivated vetoing of progress contradict the spirit and letter of the EU Treaties and should be abandoned.

Furthermore, the EU should consider a more open approach when it comes to including aspirant countries in important matters. The European Commission's 2020 Revised Enlargement Methodology foresees that **aspirant countries should be able 'to participate as observers in key EU meetings on matters of substantial importance to them'**. At the political level, this offer serves to familiarise the enlargement countries with the functioning of the EU, socialise them into the European Union's values and policymaking culture, and motivate them to step up their preparations to be able to follow and contribute in a way that helps Member States take them seriously at the EU level. This would contribute to much-needed building of mutual trust between the EU and the candidate countries.

Furthermore, early participation of representatives from candidate countries in EU decision-shaping would keep them personally accountable for implementing necessary reforms, both vis-à-vis their EU counterparts and their own compatriots.

However, the key question remains about the time frame for this stipulation to be operationalised and whether it should be linked to a specific step of the accession process, for example, when candidates **demonstrate a certain level of preparedness**.

The recent 2024 Enlargement Candidate Members Initiative of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), which for the first time **permitted representatives from civil society organisations in nine enlargement countries to be involved in the advisory work of the EESC**, is a positive step in this direction, but other EU institutions and bodies are yet to follow suit.

The EU should **encourage a continuous exchange of views between Member States and candidates**. This should go beyond discussions about the EU's internal reforms to demonstrate that candidates are seen as partners.

This practice can be fostered if **candidates receive observer status in different EU institutions and bodies**. It can also be achieved by including stakeholders from different levels in the aspirant countries (i.e. citizens, civil society, government) in any potential deliberations on the future of Europe, including a possible Convention. The **involvement of citizens from enlargement countries** in the 'new generation' European Citizens' Panels on key legislative procedures should also be considered in the new legislative cycle following the June 2024 elections to the European Parliament.

3.2 Reform of EU budget and financing

As part of its preparations for the next multiannual framework, the EU should aim to **agree on reforms of the budget in a way that allows for future EU enlargement**.

By 2027, some of the EU funding instruments will run out. For the Western Balkans, this refers to both the pre-accession funds as well as the New Growth Plan. When deciding on the next multi-annual financial framework, the EU should consider the needs of the candidate countries. To this end, it should develop **gradual inclusion of all candidates in the EU's own funds for members (such as the Cohesion Funds) but design it so that it is strictly conditional upon implementation of reforms by the aspirants.**

This would be an important and strong signal to the candidates that the EU is serious about enlargement and would leave third actors, such as China, with a significantly weaker hand to play in these countries.

3.3 Better EU policy practices and procedures

The next EU enlargement will require reconsideration of the framework of most EU policies and their financing. With Ukraine, for example, the EU will need to agree on the future of agricultural policy. There are also other key policy domains, such as foreign and defence matters and environmental policy.

While **these reforms will require revision of some of the common practices and procedures, they will also allow the European Union to truly make the most of the European project** (geo)politically, economically and socially. Therefore, the EU and its Member States should see this as an opportunity rather than a challenge.

3.4 Next European Commissioner

The next European Commissioner in charge of EU enlargement should be someone with the highest personal and political integrity. This is important both for credibility to motivate reforms in the candidate countries and to enable necessary majorities in the EU when deciding on the next steps in the accession process. Having a strong and reputable politician who is impartial to individual candidate countries is therefore key. Having a female enlargement Commissioner is long overdue.

3.5 Timeline for EU internal reforms

While candidates understand the need for the EU to implement internal reforms before the next enlargement, **it is unclear exactly what reforms need to happen and in which time frame**. This lack of clarity is weakening reformers in candidate countries and is being exploited by EU sceptics in the aspirant countries. They claim that the EU might never be ready for further expansion. It is therefore important to agree on a concrete plan and time frame for EU internal reforms. This would reassure candidates that the EU is serious about reforming itself and about accepting new members in the foreseeable future.

3.6 Reaching long-term institutional and societal consensus

Attitudes and informal practices often outweigh formalities and procedures. **The EU and its Member States should start building long-term institutional and societal consensus on the future of the European Union**. A clear cost-benefit analysis of enlargement and trusted collaboration among member and candidate states are indispensable for the EU to progress and prosper in the long run. Although this task goes beyond the scope of one mandate, a lot can be done in five years to ensure that such a climate prevails in the future.

