

CATCH-27: THE CONTRADICTORY THINKING ABOUT ENLARGEMENT IN THE EU

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SUMMARY

- Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine has reenergised the enlargement debate. Most member states now see enlargement as a way to respond to the geopolitical reality and strengthen the EU in its immediate neighbourhood.
- However, while the geopolitical arguments in favour of enlargement are even stronger today than they were 20 years ago, the process is likely to face more obstacles than it did back then.
- In most member states, the interest in enlargement is outweighed by concerns about the transformation that institutional reforms could bring about. Possible changes in the EU's balance of power, the unresolved issue of the protection of the rule of law, and bilateral conflicts are major obstacles.
- To make a credible offer to candidate countries, the EU should agree on an internal reform process alongside a timeline for the next steps in the enlargement process at the EU summit in December.
- Regardless of the outcome of the internal reform debate, it should be ready to offer candidate countries at least participation in the single market, access to the EU's budget, and observer status in EU institutions by 2030.

Introduction

For a long time, the European Union seemed like a closed club. Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission from 2014 to 2019, famously declared that no country would join the EU during his term. But Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ensuing geopolitical turmoil reawakened the EU enlargement debate.

In June 2022, the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in response to Russia's aggression. This put the topic of enlargement firmly back on the agenda and redrew attention to the EU's other candidate countries in the Western Balkans. The EU first outlined a membership perspective for all six Western Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia – at the Thessaloniki summit in 2003, concluding that they “will become an integral part of the EU”. But 20 years later, five of the six (all except Kosovo) are candidate countries and only four of these (Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia) have started accession talks. During his visit to North Macedonia in spring 2022, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell stated that the Western Balkans are a strategic priority for the EU and that their alignment with the EU on Russia proves their commitment to EU values. He added that the current circumstances are an “awakening moment for Europe, a moment to reinvigorate the enlargement process in order to anchor the Western Balkans firmly to the EU”.

Every autumn the European Commission publishes the so-called enlargement package with a detailed assessment of the candidate states' level of preparedness for accession to the EU. In each of the 35 policy negotiation areas, it defines the candidates' degree of readiness to join the EU and presents an analysis of what they still need to do to meet the membership criteria. In the last few years, the reports have been sobering. Little progress has been made, with candidate countries stalling in their alignment to the EU in many areas, or even drifting further from the bloc. This year the commission proposed opening accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and granting candidate status to Georgia “once the necessary degree of compliance is achieved”. At the upcoming European Council meeting scheduled for December in Brussels, the heads of EU states will decide whether to approve the commission's proposals.

There is no such report about the EU's own level of readiness for enlargement, although its "absorption capacity" is a precondition for accepting new members. The European Council first set out this absorption capacity at the 1993 Copenhagen summit, but the EU has never defined it, meaning it is not a measurable criterion, unlike the set of precise requirements which the candidate countries are expected to fulfil.

Whether the EU is ultimately ready for enlargement does not depend on any objective standards or the adoption of any of the concrete recommendations put forward by experts or politicians. The real measure of its absorption capacity is whether member states can reach any political consensus about when to enlarge and under what conditions. Various national interests, power relations, public opinions, and expectations regarding the end goal of the integration process inform this debate. These considerations are ultimately far more important than technical or legal ones. Unless member states can strike a grand bargain that takes into account their respective positions as well as the geopolitical context Europe finds itself in, the EU will not be able to accept new countries – even if they tick all the boxes in the commission's annual assessment.

To assess the EU's political preparedness for enlargement and understand the challenges ahead, we commissioned ECFR's network of national researchers to conduct a survey of policymakers and policy thinkers in all EU member states. The aim was to find out what dominates the national debates on enlargement, what the main hopes, concerns, and expectations around enlargement are, and how member states perceive the future of the European project against the background of its upcoming expansion. Drawing on the findings of these surveys, as well as public opinion data, interviews with experts and government officials, and political leaders' public statements, this paper analyses how far the EU has progressed in preparing for the next enlargement round and how it can build on the current momentum.

The return of enlargement

Forget enlargement fatigue. The impossibility of enlargement was the EU's mantra for more than a decade – Croatia's accession in 2013 was the exception that confirmed the rule. But European countries (with the exception of Hungary) now see enlargement in general as an appropriate way to respond to the new geopolitical reality.

Most spectacularly, leaders of countries that in the past showed little enthusiasm for enlargement have completely changed their tone. Speaking in Bratislava in May 2023, French president Emmanuel Macron, who in 2019 blocked the opening of accession talks with

Albania and North Macedonia, stated that “the question is not whether we should enlarge ... but rather how we should do it”, adding that the EU should admit new countries “as swiftly as possible”. Three weeks earlier, in a speech at the European Parliament, German chancellor Olaf Scholz declared that “we opted for a larger Europe”, and explained that this is not a matter of altruism but of securing lasting peace in Europe after the *Zeitenwende* of Russia’s war of aggression.

Other previously enlargement-sceptical countries, such as Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, or the Netherlands, have changed their approach too. Some member states have included references to EU enlargement in their strategic documents. For example, the newest Danish security strategy names the accession of both eastern and southeastern candidate countries as a priority for further partnerships.

Our national researchers paint a strikingly coherent picture of the European elite’s strategic reasoning for this change of heart. Enlargement is widely seen as a primarily geopolitical tool, and less so as an instrument to advance European values and rules for their own sake. Our national researchers in 13 countries reported that enlargement is considered a way to respond to geopolitical changes. They found widespread agreement that enlargement would help the EU to assert itself as the dominant strategic player in its immediate neighbourhood, and a clear fear that a lack of EU integration could push candidate countries – particularly in the Western Balkans – into the Russian or Chinese sphere of influence. As the communiqué of the informal EU summit in Granada on 6 October stated, “enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity”. The geopolitical rationale for enlargement is shared by countries with different strategic cultures and security interests, such as France and Poland, Portugal and Slovakia, Sweden and the Czech Republic.

However, the understanding of how to fulfil this geopolitical goal of enlargement varies across Europe. The most consequential dividing line runs between those who see EU enlargement as a security provider and a stabilising tool for the EU and those who believe that ensuring security (through NATO membership) should be a precondition for EU enlargement. Ukraine is, of course, the focal point of this debate. France’s Copernican turn on enlargement relates to the fact that, unlike in the past, it sees enlargement as a catalyst for European sovereignty rather than an impediment to that traditional French goal. In February 2023, French minister of foreign affairs Catherine Colonna underlined that “Ukraine will be stronger and Europe will be strengthened by Ukraine”. In France’s view, the EU with Ukraine could become a powerful geostrategic actor in an increasingly competitive environment and a pillar of the post-2022 European security architecture, not least because Ukraine’s strong army would complement the EU’s efforts to increase its military clout. The EU’s enlargement to the east is thus an important and almost indispensable step to fulfilling France’s long held

dream of *Europe puissance*.

This dream is not shared by countries in central and eastern Europe – now even less so than in the past. Russia’s war has demonstrated the indispensability of the United States for the EU’s security. This overwhelming impression has not been offset by the acknowledgment that the EU should prepare itself for a post-Biden America which would render a stronger cooperation on defence and security within the EU necessary or even inevitable. Our researchers found that in Poland and the Baltic states, policy elites consider NATO enlargement, rather than future accessions to the EU, the geopolitical priority. This view also seems to be shared by NATO’s newest member, Finland. Finnish prime minister Petteri Orpo has linked EU enlargement to the further enlargement of NATO, mentioning the need to bring in the US as Europe’s ultimate security guarantor. The countries that are potentially most affected by security threats in the EU’s eastern neighbourhood want to prioritise the enlargement of the transatlantic alliance, with accession to the EU as a next step. This was the order of accession that central and eastern European countries followed themselves: Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999 and the EU five years later; the EU candidate countries Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are also already NATO members. Central and eastern member states believe that only NATO membership can guarantee security: while the EU’s mutual defence clause enshrined in Article 42.7 states that countries have an obligation to provide assistance to a member state that is the victim of an aggression, they do not consider this to be credible or worth paying attention to. For them, EU membership without NATO guarantees would not provide the new members with the level of security and stability required for their integration process to be successful and could even pose risks for EU security.

Meanwhile, policymakers in a number of western European countries, including Germany, Spain, Belgium, and the Netherlands, are much more hesitant about NATO enlargement. At NATO’s Vilnius summit in July, Germany took a conservative stance towards Ukraine’s accession to NATO, supporting a statement that did not fully endorse a pathway for Ukraine’s membership. Berlin fears that Russian president Vladimir Putin would test the West’s commitment to Article 5 and that there is no will in NATO to go to war with Russia for Ukraine. But Germany is also sceptical of the EU’s defence commitments, wondering if and how the EU would be able to live up to them in the event of a conflict with Russia. [1] In a way, Germany shares the concern of the central and eastern European member states, but falls short of providing an answer to this dilemma: it neither supports the prioritisation of NATO enlargement, nor fully shares the French enthusiasm for turning the EU into a powerful geopolitical actor.

The debate among European leaders about security guarantees for Ukraine, and eventually

Moldova, as well as the ongoing discussions about Ukraine's NATO membership perspective weigh heavily on the EU enlargement debate and could eventually constitute an obstacle to Ukraine's EU accession.

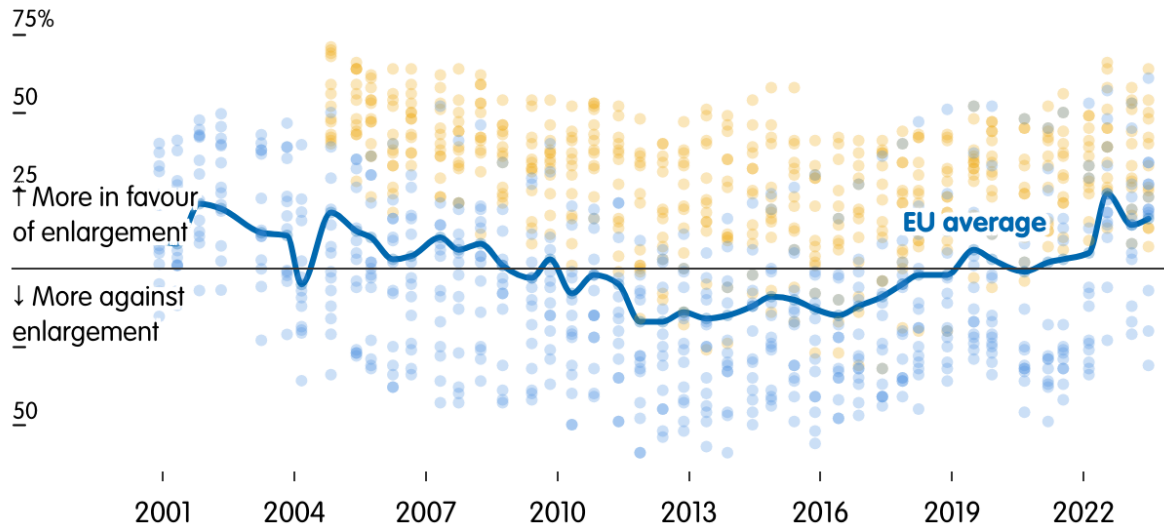
Europeans for enlargement

The shift in public opinion about the EU's enlargement is no less impressive. According to the most recent Eurobarometer from June 2023, 53 per cent of EU citizens support enlargement in principle, while 37 per cent are against it. The figures in favour may not be overwhelming, but they signal the reversal of a longstanding trend.

For years researchers have identified a substantive decline in appetite for future enlargements. A 2012 study found that support for enlargement had eroded in practically every country, regardless of its starting level and the country's membership status or accession date. Support for enlargement was at its lowest in 2008, after the financial crisis. While many countries, including France, Austria, and Germany, already had low levels of support in 2002, even those more supportive of enlargement prior to the financial crisis followed the downward trend. It was not just policymakers that suffered from enlargement fatigue: from 2010 onwards a stable majority of Europeans consistently declared that they oppose further enlargement of the EU. In general, the public in newer member states, including those that joined the EU in 2004 (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovenia, and Slovakia), in 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania), and Croatia in 2013, are significantly and reliably more pro-enlargement than the older member states.

Difference between for and against opinions on enlargement among the public, by member state, 2000-2023

Countries that joined the EU ● before 2004 ● In 2004 and after



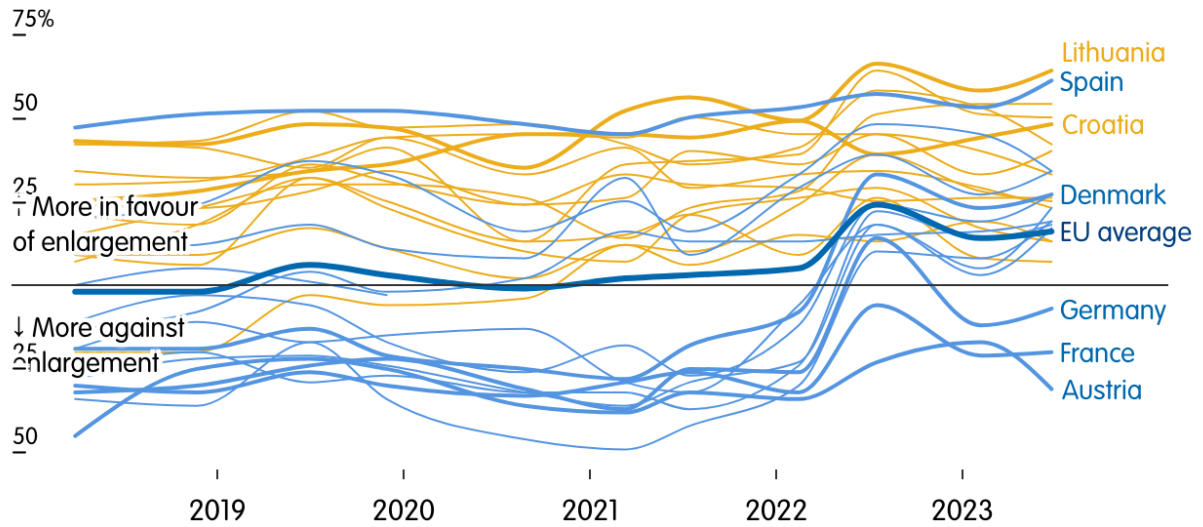
The chart shows the difference between "for" and "against" opinions about the further enlargement of the EU to include other countries.

Source: Eurobarometer
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Since February 2022, however, public support for EU enlargement has risen in almost every member state. The societies of Lithuania, Spain, and Croatia are most convinced of further EU enlargement, with majorities of 77 per cent, 74 per cent, and 71 per cent respectively saying they were in favour in spring 2023. But a solid majority (of over 60 per cent) of the public in Latvia, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Ireland, Portugal, and Sweden also supports enlargement. Even in member states where the public has long been sceptical of enlargement, such as the Netherlands, Finland, and Denmark, there has been a significant shift in public opinion. In as many as 24 countries, the number of advocates of enlargement is higher than the number of opponents.

Difference between for and against opinions on enlargement among the public, by member state, 2018-2023

Countries that joined the EU ● before 2004 ● In 2004 and after



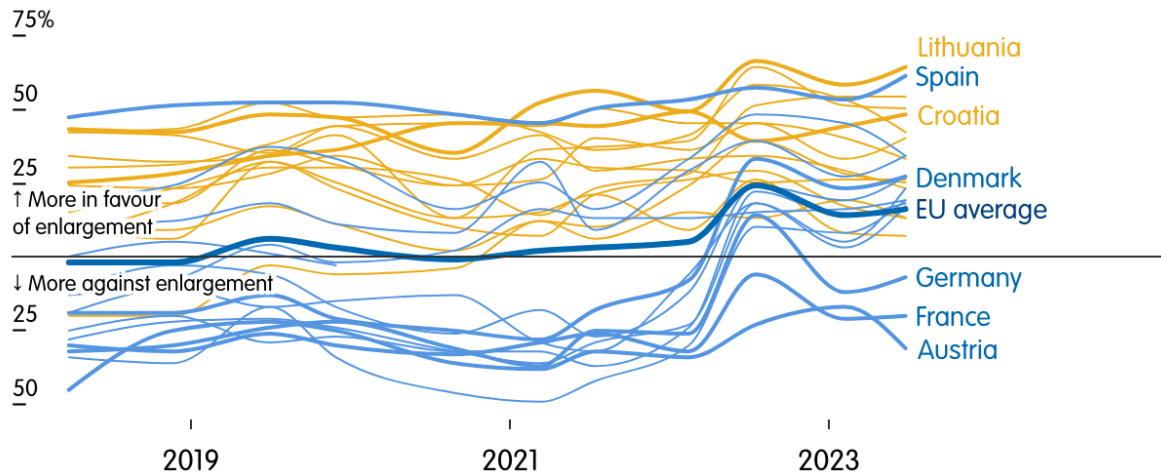
The chart shows the difference between "for" and "against" opinions about the further enlargement of the EU to include other countries.

Source: Eurobarometer
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Difference between for and against opinions on enlargement among the public, by member state, 2018-2023

Countries that joined the EU

● before 2004 ● In 2004 and after



The chart shows the difference between "for" and "against" opinions about the further enlargement of the EU to include other countries.

Source: Eurobarometer
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Moreover, support for enlargement is overall higher than it was before the last major round of enlargement in 2004. By the end of the 1990s, enlargement had become one of the EU's top priorities. The Helsinki European Council in December 1999 reconfirmed the EU's commitment to the accession negotiations with Cyprus, Estonia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Hungary, which had begun in March 1998, and began those with Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Slovakia, and Romania. In April 1999, the average support for enlargement in the 15 EU member states was only 44 per cent, almost 10 percentage points lower than it is today. If the state of public opinion is an important indicator of the EU's desire to enlarge, the EU looks more ready today than it did 25 years ago.

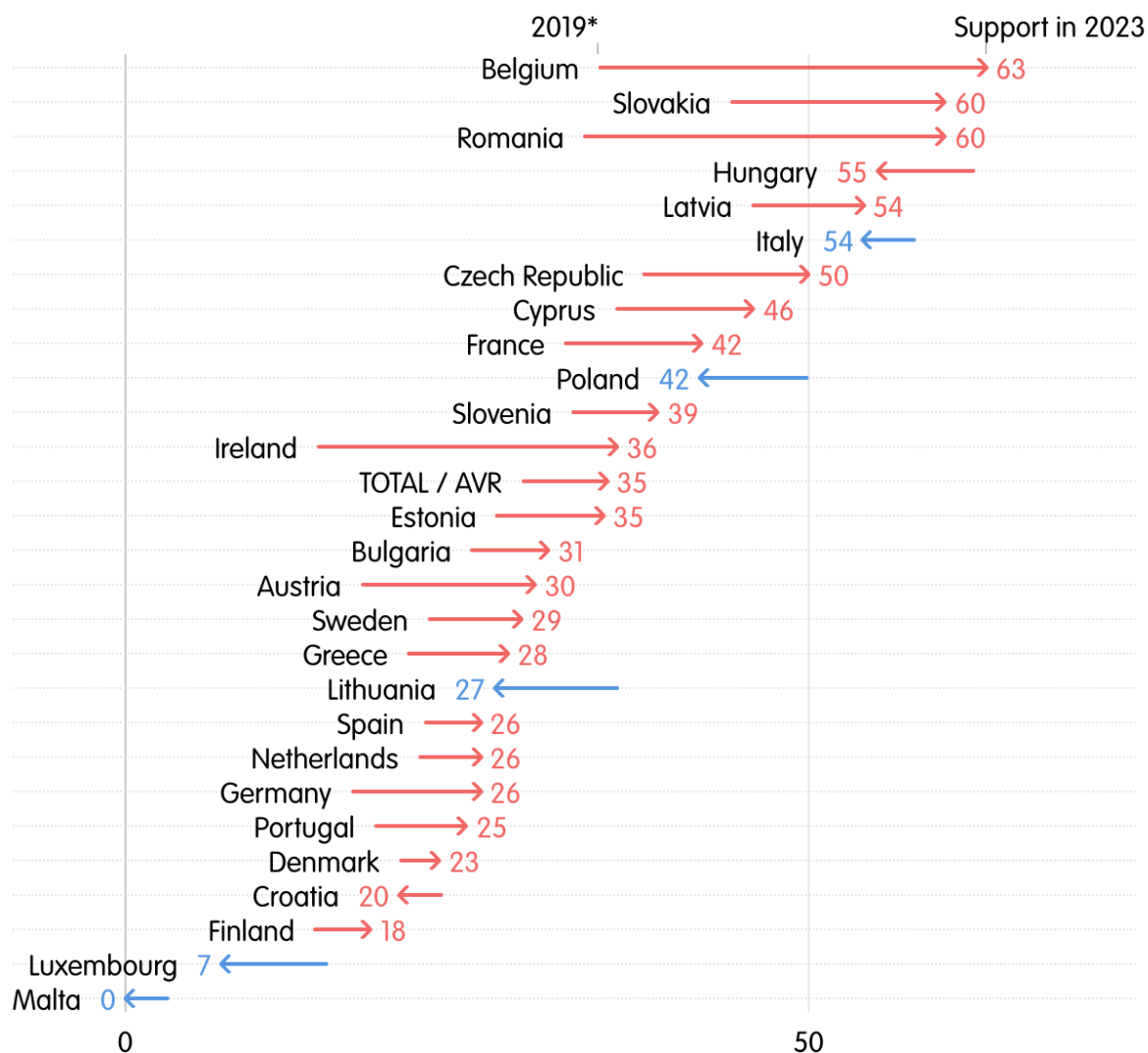
And yet, old patterns do not die easily. In traditionally hesitant countries, such as France, Denmark, Austria, the Netherlands, and Germany, reservations remain high. Only 29 per cent of Austrians, 35 per cent of the French, and 42 per cent of Germans are in favour of new countries joining the EU in the near future.

Furthermore, there are signs that public support should not be taken for granted. When the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022, 57 per cent of Europeans

declared their support for enlargement (four percentage points higher than one year later). The question of how sustainable the new public support for enlargement is, is thus legitimate.

The political trends across Europe only add to this concern. A comparison of the results of the 2019 European Parliament elections with the most recent opinion polls shows that the level of support for anti-EU and populist parties across the EU is likely to increase – which does not generally bode well for the enlargement process. Our analysis of the political trends in EU member states, based on the changes in the party system already taking place, similarly found that in 12 member states – including France, Germany, Italy, and Austria – the domestic political context is likely to become less accepting of enlargement in the coming months and years. This should only strengthen the sense of urgency to use the current momentum to make meaningful progress in the enlargement process and not delay important decisions.

Change in support for Eurosceptic and populist parties 2019-2023. In per cent



Graph shows the cumulative votes received by Eurosceptic and populist parties in the 2019 European Parliament elections and results from public opinion polls from 2023.

*Support in 2019 European Parliament election.

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State of play

The EU therefore has a rare opportunity to build on this support to advance the enlargement process. But despite the broad consensus that enlargement would help strengthen the EU in its immediate neighbourhood and allow it to operate as a geopolitical actor, our research has

shown that the debate about how to enlarge and when has barely begun in EU member states. The uptick in support is a reaction to the current geopolitical turbulence and is not yet grounded in a deep political and conceptual change. In fact, the salience of the enlargement issue in the political discourse in almost every member state is still low. Most of our national researchers reported that national positions on budget, institutional reforms, or enlargement methodology have not yet been fleshed out. One year after the historic decisions of June 2022, there are still very few conclusions from European governments about how to match the political declarations with meaningful political steps.

France and Germany stand out as the countries pushing for the debate to move forward. The only extensive food-for-thought paper about how to make the EU fit for enlargement so far was submitted by a group of independent experts convened by Paris and Berlin. At the beginning of November, German foreign minister Annalena Baerbock also hosted the Conference on Europe to discuss EU reform and enlargement. The Polish government laid out its position on the reforms suggested in the food-for-thought paper in a letter in late September, while Austria made suggestions about how to shape and accelerate the enlargement process in the Western Balkans in another unpublished paper. [2] Besides these efforts and those of Swedish and Lithuanian think tanks (inspired by the respective national governments), there have been no other national contributions to the EU-level debate.

Some initial positioning has nevertheless become clear. Our national researchers report that there is a broad consensus against a big bang enlargement, like that of 2004, and in favour of a merit-based approach for all member states. However, some countries are more focused on the accession of the Western Balkan countries, and some are more dedicated to Ukraine's and Moldova's membership.

The EU's decision to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status pushed the member states that are focused on the southeastern rather than the eastern neighbourhood to take action. Although the new support for enlargement could help revive the moribund accession process of the Western Balkan countries, Ukraine's predominance in the political debate and sheer geopolitical relevance threatened to overshadow the Balkan cause. In June 2023 Austrian foreign minister Alexander Schallenberg announced a new grouping of member states, the Friends of the Western Balkans, including Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, and Slovenia, which wants to use the current momentum surrounding enlargement to accelerate the integration of the EU's southeastern neighbours. These countries signed the Göttweig Declaration in June 2023, which underlines that "it is vital that the EU makes full use of the enlargement policy also as a geostrategic tool" and states that they want "to see our Western Balkans partners at the EU table as often as possible, be it formally or informally, as participants or observers". The declaration focuses

exclusively on the Western Balkans and does not mention other applicant countries. In September, Schallenberg and the Austrian minister of European affairs, Karoline Edtstadler, also sent a “non-paper” to the EU, in which they stated that EU integration of the Western Balkan countries should be accelerated. Like the Götting Declaration, the paper paid no attention to the question of Ukraine and Moldova.

Friends of the Western Balkans



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Germany is not part of the Friends of the Western Balkans grouping, but Berlin has made it clear that the Balkan countries must not be left out and that an enlargement that does not

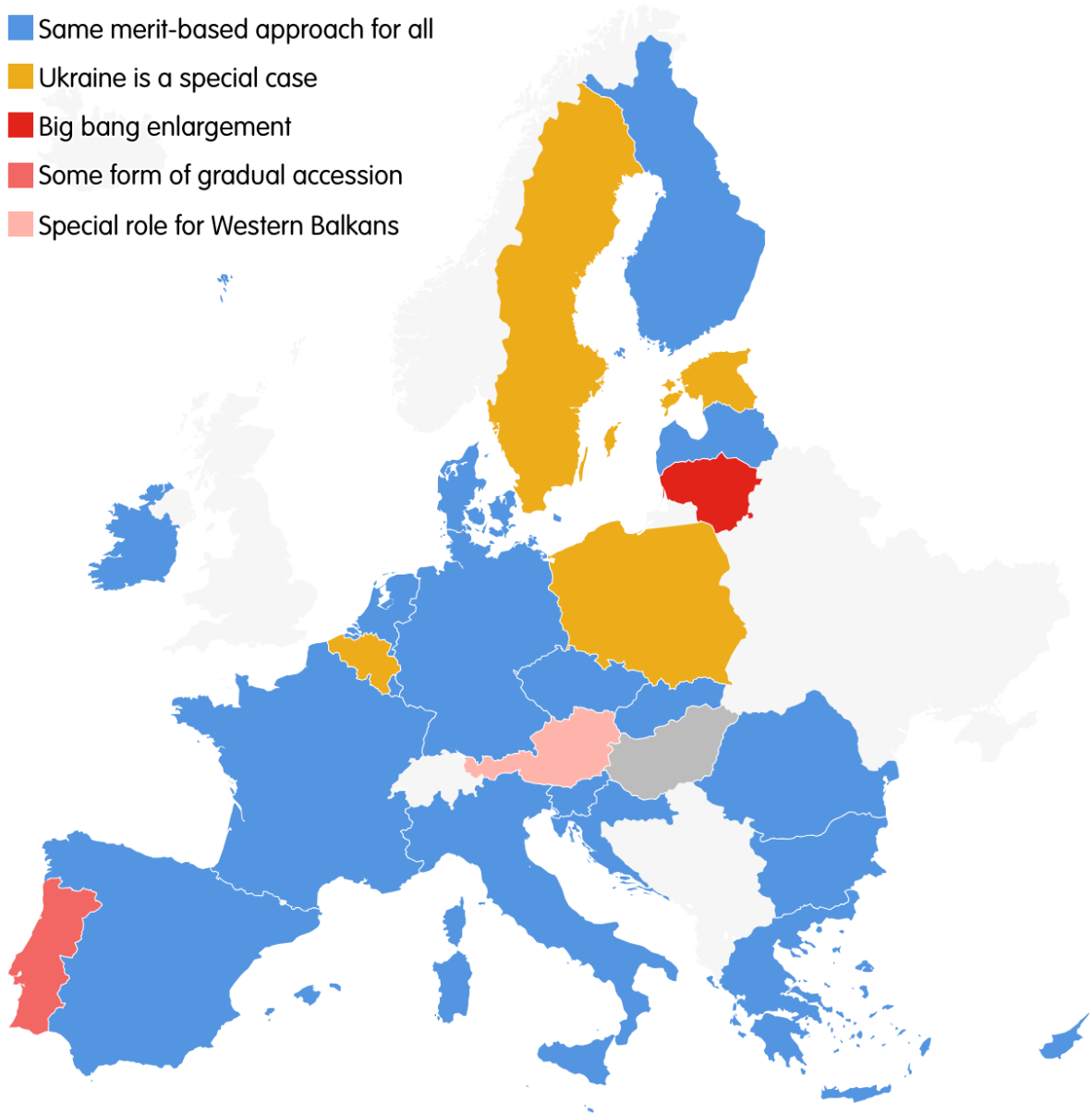
include them would be politically problematic. Speaking in the European Parliament in May 2023, Scholz called on the EU to keep its promises to the Western Balkans and speed up their integration. Not doing so could enhance frustration and disappointment in a region that has been waiting for EU integration for a very long time. With the Friends of the Western Balkans and Germany supporting the Balkan countries, it is difficult to imagine Ukraine and Moldova joining the bloc before the older candidate states.

There is no 'Friends of Ukraine (or eastern Europe)' group. However, eastern European and Nordic states believe that Ukraine's accession would be the real game-changer for the EU and that – even if the merit-based approach is key – Ukraine is a special case. Our national researchers reported that in Estonia, Sweden, Poland, and Belgium, Ukraine is seen as the priority and that any enlargement that does not include Ukraine is hardly conceivable.

Despite this, the strained relationship between Brussels and Poland – a key country in the group because of its size, location, and central role in Ukraine's support – and its relative political isolation in the EU could be a reason why closer cooperation between these countries has not yet come about. Since spring 2023, Poland's relations with Ukraine have also been harmed by the conflict over grain imports, which put Warsaw's role as the main advocate of Kyiv's accession to the EU on shaky ground. With Poland marginalised in the EU and Sweden only begrudgingly returning to its pro-enlargement stance, the Warsaw-Stockholm axis which in 2008 gave birth to the idea of the Eastern Partnership that shaped the EU's policy towards its eastern neighbourhood for more than a decade, has not yet had a chance for revival.

What sequence of accession for EU candidate countries does your country support?

- Same merit-based approach for all
- Ukraine is a special case
- Big bang enlargement
- Some form of gradual accession
- Special role for Western Balkans



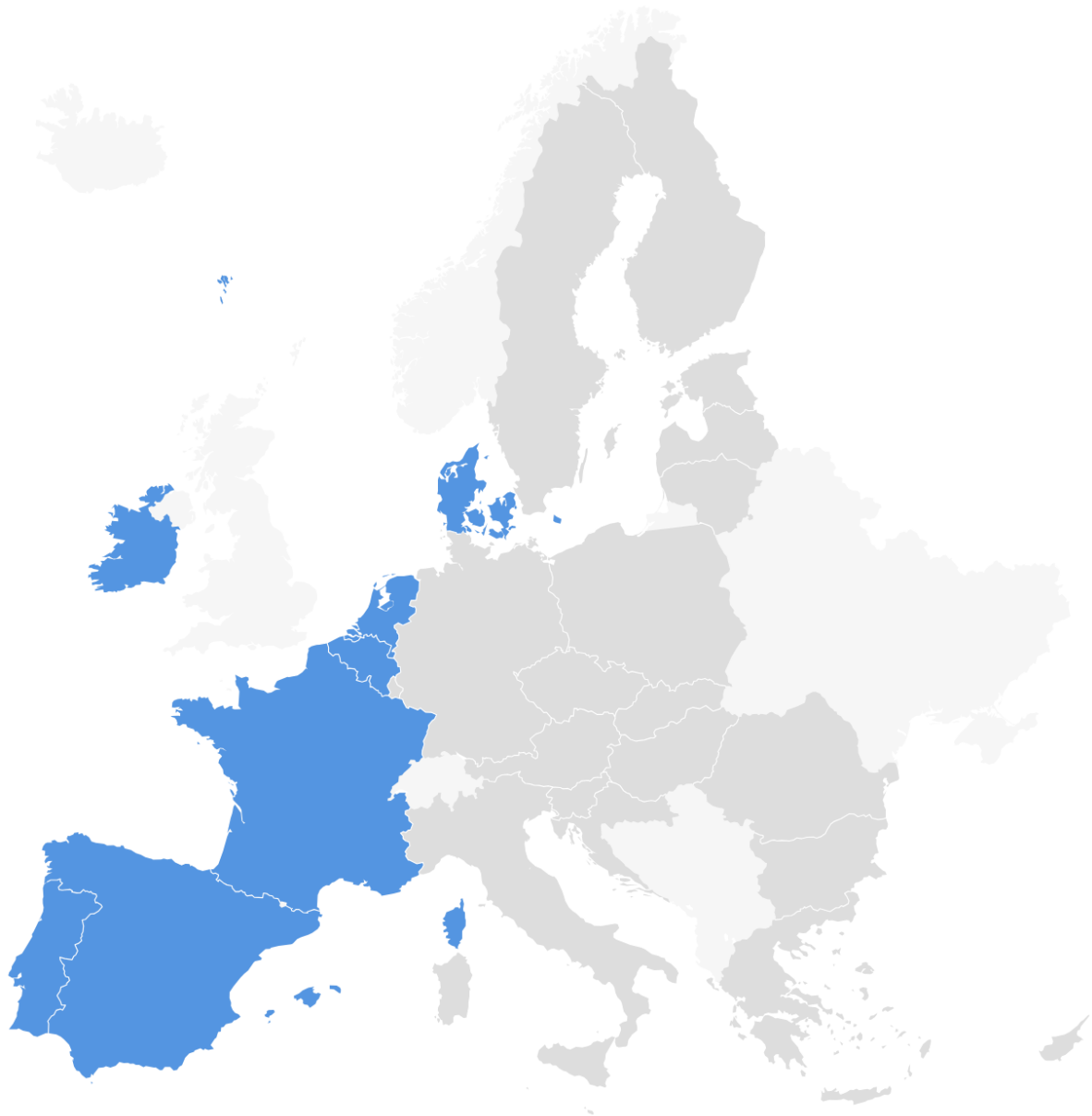
Source: ECFR national researchers
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The relative absence of northern and eastern member states in the debate on enlargement since June 2022 is striking. For many observers, the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova was a powerful symbol of the EU's centre of attention shifting towards the east. But paradoxically, there is so far no sign that Ukraine's neighbouring EU member states have taken the opportunity to take the lead. The political change in Poland, with the new pro-

European government led by Donald Tusk likely to take power in December, could offer an opportunity for the countries of the region to join forces in shaping the enlargement agenda.

Finally, although the shift of the EU's centre of gravity to the east has not yet materialised, the possible expansion of the EU to the east and southeast of Europe and the changes this would imply to the bloc's balance of power has raised alarm bells among some western European countries. The former Portuguese prime minister António Costa, explained that “each enlargement to the East means that Europe's centre of attention is shifted to the East of Europe. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, yet it is indispensable for us to greatly boost the Atlantic alliance”.

Atlantic alliance



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In May 2023, Portugal invited an informal group of countries with strong Atlantic ties, including Spain, France, Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Denmark, to discuss “matters of common interest and setting up the right balance between Europe’s continental and Atlantic projections”. The group does not have a concrete agenda, but its formation reflects the concern that the financial cost of enlargement may come at the expense of their interests. For example, the European Commission’s announcement in May that it had approved a €1 billion package of direct state aid for Polish farmers hit by the negative

consequences of Ukrainian grain imports upset Portugal and Spain, which complained that they had not received a positive response to their request for support to cope with the effects of a serious drought for two consecutive years. It is clear that the policy and financial implications of candidate countries' integration with the EU will not only affect neighbouring states, whose trade and competition will be impacted, but will reverberate across the bloc.

The EU's self-transformative power

Enlargement does not just promise a transformation for the EU's neighbourhood. Since June 2022, enlargement has become a codeword for a new battle about the future – or even *finalité* – of the EU integration process to an extent unseen since the EU's attempt to adopt the European Constitution in 2004. Our national researchers report a growing awareness among EU member states that a key challenge for the EU will be not only to motivate and support candidate states to adapt but also to change the way the EU operates. The prospect of EU enlargement – be it close or distant – constitutes an inevitable shift in the political balance of power in the EU: between big and small; east and west; rich and poor; statist and free marketeers. A great transformation may await the EU – some countries hope for it, others fear it. Very few, though, have doubts that it is in the making.

For France, bringing new member states into the EU is not only a response to geopolitical challenges, but also a way to bring about a deep transformation of the European project. In his speech in Bratislava in May 2023, Macron claimed that the EU needed to enlarge and “be rethought very extensively with regard to its governance and its aims”. As Joseph de Weck put it, enlargement can be the lever through which Macron's vision of a fiscally potent, militarily more self-reliant, and geopolitical EU sees the light of day. French experts considered Brexit to be a similar opportunity for a “European renaissance”. Technically speaking, “enlargement” may not even be the most accurate term for what could be at the end of that road, which may rather be a reconstitution of the EU with new countries on board.

The French vision would include an extensive use of the principle of differentiated integration. According to the French secretary of state for European affairs, Laurence Boone, “we need to think about ‘differentiated’ integration, in order to ‘anchor’ candidate or potential candidate countries to the European Union as quickly as possible”. France is generally in favour of the idea of forming coalitions of the willing, and an enlarged EU may offer an opportunity to put this into practice. However, Paris has stopped short of defining the areas in which European integration could or should advance in smaller groups; if and how such a closer cooperation in a smaller format would be possible in areas affecting the single market; and what the implications would be for the EU budget. But should the EU decide to pursue

this concept, new members would enter an EU which would differ greatly from its current design.

Germany's centre-left government is in favour of deepening European integration, as the long-term goal to create a "federal Europe", enshrined in the 2021 coalition agreement shows, but its focus is on both institutional efficiency and cohesion, rather than on a multi-speed or multi-tier EU. In a speech in Prague in August 2022, Scholz explicitly said that enlargement was dependent on institutional changes, citing the extension of qualified majority voting (QMV) as used by the European Council, instead of unanimity voting, to foreign policy and taxation in particular. But an extensive use of differentiated integration that could potentially transform the EU is not among Germany's priorities. Meanwhile, Portugal has floated the idea of an 'à la carte' Europe, proposing a vision of the EU as a house with many rooms with varying sets of inhabitants. Lisbon would like to see EU enlargement and reform moving in lockstep, with this principle enshrined in the European Council declaration from the Brussels meeting in December.

While other countries have not formulated comprehensive approaches to the EU reform versus enlargement conundrum, their hesitance to embrace France's and Germany's ambitions is visible in the reports provided by our researchers and in conversations with policymakers across the EU. Nordic countries, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states are all sceptical about major institutional changes. In background interviews some even openly or tacitly voiced suspicions that the ambitious agenda favoured by Paris and Berlin is in fact aimed at preventing and not enabling enlargement from happening. [3] Whether or not this is the case, it is clear that the reform agenda could slow down the enlargement process.

Poland's recently defeated Law and Justice government argued that the EU was efficient in crises and that its institutional set-up is flexible enough to react to unforeseen developments. Poland also rejects the criticism that the last big bang enlargement, of which it was a part, negatively affected the EU's decision-making process. Indeed, research has shown that the 2004 enlargement did not have a major negative effect on the decision-making capacity of the EU (the number of decisions has actually increased) and that new member states have not blocked EU decisions more often than older ones). The new Polish government led by Tusk will most probably change the rhetoric about the EU – he declared that his goal is to "accelerate the process of returning Poland to full presence in the European Union" – but a fundamental shift on substance towards an institutional overhaul should not be expected. During a visit to Brussels in October, Tusk said that "regardless of the French and German positions [on EU reforms], revolutionary changes are not needed". Polish policymakers maintain the need to reform the EU before enlargement is overblown and creates artificial hurdles for the accession of new countries. Warsaw instead favours pursuing institutional

reform only after new members have joined the bloc. This would mirror the process of the 2004 enlargement: the Lisbon Treaty was adopted only in 2009.

There is nonetheless a broad consensus among EU member states that changes to EU structures should not involve a treaty change in the foreseeable future. In her State of the Union speech in September 2023, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen declared her openness to treaty changes, but added “we cannot – and we should not – wait for Treaty change to move ahead with enlargement”. During the Conference on the Future of Europe – a citizen-led series of debates between 2021 and 2022 – a group of member states (Austria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and Sweden) argued for excluding treaty amendments altogether. According to diplomatic sources, at the informal summit in Granada on 4 October this position was confirmed by a vast majority of EU member states. [4]

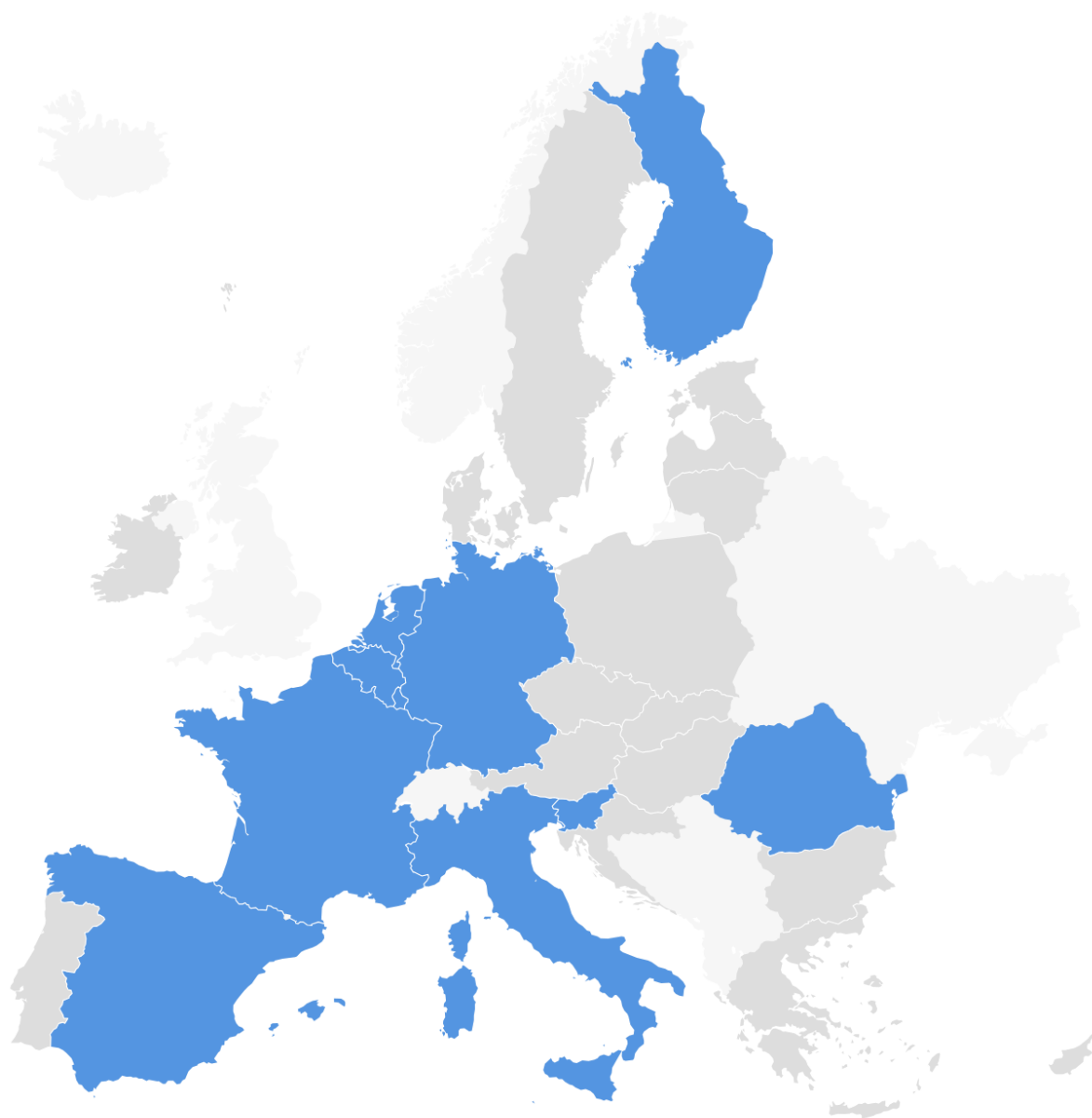
At the same time, most countries are convinced that institutional adaptation – though below the threshold of treaty change – is necessary. Finland expects the European Commission to “prepare proposals on how to safeguard the decision-making capacity of a larger Union and how to organise and fund key policy areas as the number of Member States increases”. The Slovenian foreign minister Tanja Fajon believes that “the EU with more than 30 member states at the table simply cannot be as efficient as it should be. Such reform will not be an easy task, but it is necessary”. But it would be fruitless to look for concrete reform proposals beyond the acknowledgment that some changes are inevitable.

Qualified majority voting

The fundamental question of power and sovereignty is epitomised in the controversy about extending the use of QMV. Scholz argued that unanimity voting and the use of veto power by individual countries risks preventing the union moving ahead, and that this risk could increase with more new members. For Germany, moving gradually towards majority voting would allow Europe to be “capable of holding its own on the international stage”. In May 2023, nine member states – Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Spain (with Romania joining later) – launched the Group of Friends to foster Qualified Majority Voting in the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. The group wrote that it is “convinced that EU foreign policy needs adapted processes and procedures in order to strengthen the EU as a foreign policy actor”. Italy’s membership in this group is worth noting given that the Italian government is led by the Eurosceptic prime minister Giorgia Meloni who opposes deeper integration and centralisation of the EU. Meanwhile, the Italian foreign minister Antonio Tajani has openly called for majority voting in fiscal and foreign policy (and even for the European Parliament to obtain the right to

propose legislation).

Friends of qualified majority voting



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However, many countries, particularly in central and eastern Europe, remain highly sceptical or outrightly against the extension of QMV. Under the Law and Justice government, Poland openly rejected such a reform, claiming that it paved the way for centralisation and loss of sovereignty. According to the Polish foreign minister Zbigniew Rau, “Poland will never support the idea of moving away from unanimity to qualified majority voting in the common foreign and security policy”. Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban has compared the EU’s

allegedly illegitimate interference with domestic politics to the Soviet Union in a clear rejection of even its current model. Austria has also voiced its opposition to reforms which would entail further deepening of EU integration. Austrian chancellor Karl Nehammer stated that the EU “will never fit together in a template system like the US”. He opposed a more deeply integrated EU and the idea to move away from unanimity voting, citing European countries’ individual histories. According to the chancellor, instead of “centralisation” in Brussels, Austria favours the principle of subsidiarity. Of the newer member states, only Slovenia is part of the friends of QMV group.

Many member states are not prepared to lose the power they already have by giving up their veto power. Smaller and medium-sized countries considered Brexit to already change the balance of power within the EU to their detriment. As our researchers report, some central and eastern European countries, such as Bulgaria, as well as Greece in the south, worry that a mere extension of QMV would further strengthen Germany and France and take away a tool they deem necessary to protect their national interests. Theoretically, the so-called passarelle clause in the Lisbon Treaty allows QMV to be extended if unanimously agreed upon without a treaty change. However, such an attempt would inevitably put the weighting of votes in the European Council up for debate as smaller countries would likely insist that their voting power is strengthened. This would be impossible without treaty change.

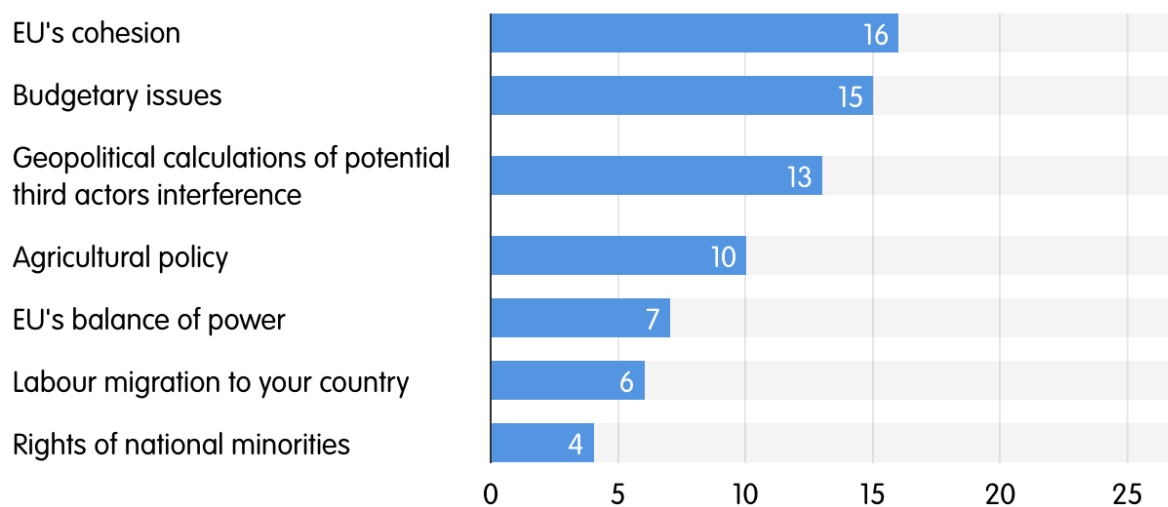
The QMV conundrum illustrates the risk that institutional reform poses for the enlargement process. The countries that are most supportive of enlargement fear the debate about EU reform the most. And their interest in enlargement does not necessarily outweigh the potential negative consequences that the unfolding EU transformation could entail. While various EU politicians maintain that they want to reform the EU to make it fit for enlargement, an agreement on the reforms among the member states looks like a very distant goal. Meanwhile, candidate countries fear that the debate about reform is a smokescreen to mask the lack of will and ability to enlarge the EU further.

Challenges ahead

While the potential extension of QMV has so far attracted the most attention, three other financial, institutional, and political conundrums stand out as defining factors of the EU’s absorption capacity. As our researchers indicate, the future of the EU’s budget and the EU’s cohesion are among the key concerns of EU member states regarding enlargement. In addition, bilateral disputes between candidate countries and between them and some member states remain a key obstacle for the enlargement process to move forward.

What are the key concerns in your country regarding enlargement?

Number of EU member states

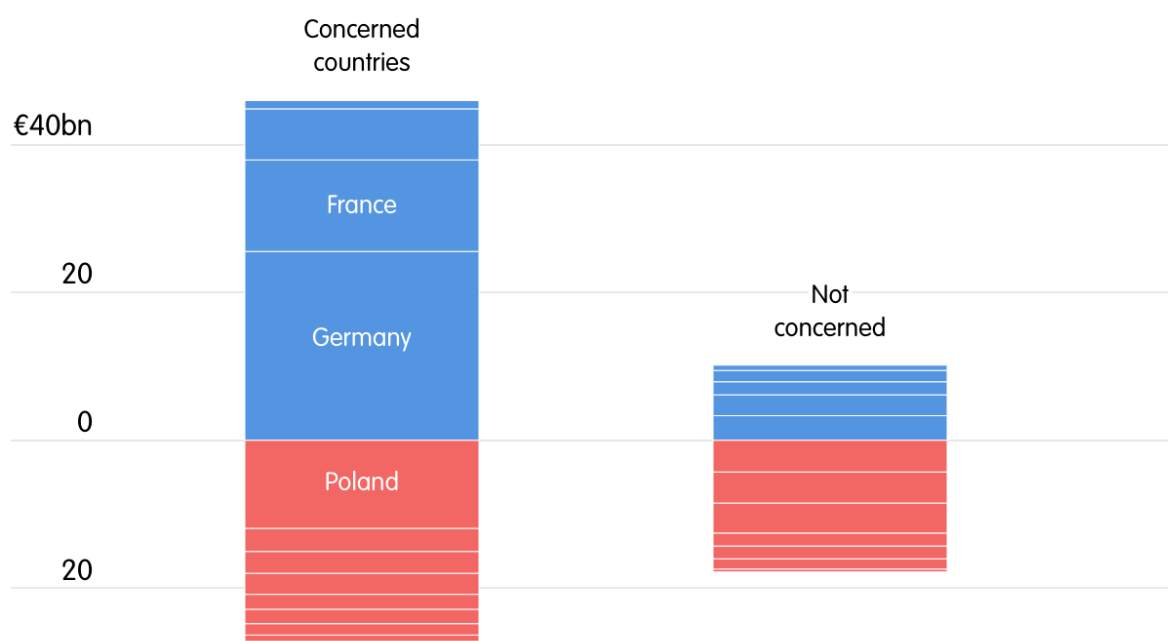


Source: ECFR
ECFR · ecf.eu

New money for the EU

Our researchers from 15 countries – both net contributors to the EU budget (such as the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany), and net recipients (such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Estonia) – reported that consequences for the EU budget are among their main concerns.

Member states that consider budgetary issues among their main concerns. Net contributors and recipients of the EU budget, 2021



Source: ECFR, Statista
ECFR · ecf.eu

Preliminary assessments have indicated that, assuming no change to the existing common agricultural policy (CAP) and cohesion amounts that the current member states receive, Ukraine would qualify for more than €180 billion from the EU budget, while the Western Balkans would receive around €50 billion. The European Council Secretariat’s estimations are even higher, putting the financial cost of adding Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and the six Western Balkan countries to the EU at €256.8 billion. This would imply a reduction of farm subsidies for existing net recipients of about a fifth and mean that many net recipients would become net contributors.

These predictions do not take into account transition periods or opt-outs which may significantly lower the EU's budgetary expenditures for future members. Another study also comes to less alarmistic conclusions: taking into account the capping provisions for cohesion payments and farm subsidies, it estimates that Ukraine could be eligible for €18.9 billion per year, after possible transition periods have expired. The study also points out that the EU's proposed €50 billion Ukraine Facility for the next four years (2024-2027) amounts to an annual €12.5 billion, not so far off the estimate if Ukraine were a member.

However, the budgetary challenge remains huge. Even if the accession of candidate countries may prove less costly than doomsayers predict, a deep overhaul of the EU's finances seems to be inevitable. The EU's financial needs are already rising due to a number of mounting challenges, including the energy crisis, Russia's war on Ukraine, and migration, which the current budget for 2021-2027 (€1.1 trillion) and its structure are unprepared to respond to. In addition, from 2028 the EU will have to start repaying the Next Generation EU fund worth €800 billion, the annual payments of which could reach between €22 billion and €27 billion in 2030, before declining gradually towards €13.9 billion at the end of the programme in 2058. The EU will also need to finance its growing list of new priorities, including investments in technology, green industry, defence, and the Social Climate Fund. Any gradual accession – 'staged accession' or membership in the single market – assumes that the candidate states will enjoy much more generous access to EU funds even before they are granted full political rights in the bloc.

Moreover, the EU will have to generate substantial financial resources for Ukraine regardless of when the country's full membership becomes possible. The overall cost of Ukraine's reconstruction alone has been estimated at between \$411 billion and \$1 trillion over a decade, to which the EU will contribute significantly. At the European Council summit in October, EU leaders approved using the profits from frozen Russian assets (which amount to €200 billion in the EU) to finance Ukraine's reconstruction. But it remains to be seen if, how, and when this should happen.

While diffuse concerns about the future of the EU's financing haunt the unfolding discussion about enlargement, most member states seem to still be in denial about the inevitable trade-offs and the urgency of decisions required. Without an increase of the EU's budget, either through larger national contributions, new own resources, or more debt, the EU will most probably not be able to cover its rising costs. Alternatively, some significant cuts will be required to existing programmes, including cohesion funds and the CAP. This year's mid-term review of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) offered a sobering account of the budgetary conundrum: the servicing of EU debt, new priorities, and the costs of the Ukraine

Facility (plus the depletion of the budget due to the war in Ukraine) will make the agreement among member states and EU institutions on how to adjust the EU budget to make it sustainable until 2027 particularly difficult. They are likely to agree to grant €50 billion for the Ukraine Facility for four years until the end of 2027 (provided that Hungary lifts its opposition in exchange for the release of EU funds). This will be financed by a one-off increase of national contributions, but the structural problem of how to finance such expenditures in the long term (beyond 2028) will remain.

Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Austria, and the Netherlands suggested that the commission should seek savings in the existing budget, while Sweden put forward a paper highlighting how to generate up to €25 billion through cuts to existing programmes. The commission has proposed introducing new revenues to the EU budget based on corporate profits in member states. But the majority of EU countries are sceptical of the plan, with only Greece and Portugal welcoming the package. The French, German, and Portuguese ministers for Europe published a joint article expressing their general support for creating new own resources for the EU, but other countries remain hesitant.

New revenues are often unpopular in the increasingly polarised European debate, as they suggest that the EU has centralising ambitions. But if members states do not agree on new own resources within the next two years, the budgetary battle ahead of the MFF 2028-2034 is likely to become even more difficult than it usually is. This would further limit the EU's room for manoeuvre in its policy towards the candidate countries.

Friends and foes of the rule of law

While the scope and character of the majority of the institutional reforms required for the EU to be fit for enlargement remain rather vague in the political debate, there is a broad consensus that the rule of law should remain the non-negotiable criterion for accession. Member states seem to be even more concerned by the possibility that countries that could undermine the bloc's value system and rules-based order may join the EU than by the potential negative impact on the bloc's decision-making. Our national researchers found that the experience with illiberal regimes in Hungary and Poland was often cited as a warning that the EU institutions are not capable of effectively handling problems related to democratic backsliding or the outright rejection of EU decisions by some member states. In as many as 16 countries, our researchers found that particular attention is paid to the EU's cohesion and the need to solve the rule of law problem before the EU invites new members.

The fear of accepting unconsolidated or vulnerable democracies contributes to the rejection of 'fast track' and 'big bang' solutions. The Friends of the Western Balkans group puts less

emphasis on these principles and stresses rather the need to accelerate accession talks for the Western Balkan states. However, the group's primary interest is not to enable the full membership of the candidate countries as soon as possible (this is a long-term goal). Rather they focus on how to move ahead with a gradual integration which would require a lower level of alignment in the foreseeable future without a strong rule of law conditionality. Strengthening the EU's instruments to protect the rule of law, such as the EU budget conditionality and Article 7, emerge as a key precondition to accession especially for Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Ireland (which are part of the informal Friends of the Rule of Law group), as well as Germany and France. However, ideas about how to protect the rule of law and tackle violations, remain vague.

In light of this, Hungary is the most worrying member state in the enlargement process. Hungary is a staunch supporter of accepting new countries from the Western Balkans, in particular Serbia, with whom it enjoys strong ties, but which has failed to align its foreign and security policy to the EU regarding sanctions against Russia. While the EU and the US have tried to coax Serbia away from Russia's orbit and towards Euro-Atlantic integration, in June Hungary and Serbia established a Strategic Cooperation Council and promptly signed 12 bilateral agreements, including one to establish a new joint gas company, SERBHUNGAS, and a memorandum of understanding to build a crude oil pipeline between the two countries. Orban has maintained close relations with Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic and the leader of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, despite their destructive behaviour in the region, including threats to Bosnia's statehood and the incitement of violence in the north of Kosovo, and their close relations with Putin. Orban has even threatened to use Hungary's veto power to prevent the EU from sanctioning either leader. Given that many countries are concerned about the accession of illiberal candidate countries, Hungary's behaviour risks undermining the enlargement process.

Against this background, illiberal populism is a major political threat to enlargement, not because populist parties will inevitably take power in numerous countries and derail the enlargement process completely (although the political trends are not favourable), but because the more countries embrace illiberal rules that undermine the foundations of the EU, the more general opposition there will be to accepting new countries.

In that regard, the outcome of the Polish election may bring a grain of hope. It weakens the 'sovereigntist' camp in the EU (leaving Orban's Hungary as its main proponent), which clearly rejects the rule of law conditionality. It demonstrates that illiberalism can be rolled back and that the EU mechanisms (including infringement procedures and verdicts by the European Court of Justice) do play an important role in containing it while it is still in power. This could help alleviate the fear in some member states that are concerned about the potential

irreversibility of democratic backsliding. The new liberal Polish government could also become a champion of the defence of the rule of law and preventive mechanisms against its breakdown, including adequate arrangements in the accession treaties to be signed in future.

Bilateral conflicts trap

Finally, the EU will not be able to advance the enlargement process and restore candidate countries' trust in it unless it can successfully deal with bilateral issues among member states and candidate countries. Member states have repeatedly used their veto power to delay or block the accession or accession negotiations of candidate countries due to bilateral issues, including territorial disputes and minority issues, undermining the credibility and efficiency of the accession process.

For example, Slovenia previously blocked the opening of accession negotiations with Croatia over a maritime delimitation dispute. Greece vetoed the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia after the country became a candidate in 2005 because of a dispute over its name. Greece lifted its veto when the country changed its name to North Macedonia in 2018 but North Macedonia then found itself vetoed by Bulgaria over minority issues. In 2022, Bulgaria finally agreed to lift its veto on negotiations on the condition that North Macedonia amend its constitution to include a reference to the Bulgarian minority in the country, but this condition has not yet been met and faces considerable opposition.

North Macedonia is not the only country that risks having its accession blocked because of bilateral issues. Hungary's relations with Ukraine over minority issues could disrupt Ukraine's accession process. The two countries have been conducting bilateral negotiations over Hungary's ethnic minority and its language rights in Ukraine, but Hungary has already threatened to use its veto power if Ukraine does not implement enhanced policies on minority rights and language in particular. Meanwhile, Greece's maritime dispute with Albania and its recent rows over Greek minority rights in Albania have the potential to block Albania's accession negotiations.

Moving towards majority voting in foreign policy could serve as a remedy to obstacles posed by member states' veto powers. But most countries are hesitant to give up their veto power because it protects issues of national importance. Introducing QMV for decisions in the various phases of the accession process (opening and closing of negotiation chapters) could be the lowest common denominator and a compromise which could free the EU from the bilateral conflicts trap.

Undoing the knot

Russia's war on Ukraine poses major political and security challenges for Europe. It also offers a unique opportunity for policymakers to revive the idea of the EU as a peace project. As our analysis shows, the EU has embarked on a new journey towards enlargement, triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Member states agree that there is a geopolitical rationale for enlargement, and the support among the public and political elites is at a record high in comparison to previous years and phases of enlargement. The scope and magnitude of the challenge is comparable only with the big bang enlargement of 2004. But although the geopolitical arguments in favour of enlargement are even stronger today than they were 20 years ago, the process is likely to face more obstacles than it did back then.

The debate on how to enlarge the EU has hardly begun. The geopolitical rhetoric masks deep concerns in member states about the consequences of enlargement and widespread scepticism about the EU's absorption capacity. France and Germany, which have so far shown most interest in driving the EU-level debate on enlargement, seem to first and foremost see it as an opportunity to embark on a reform of the EU, which they perceive as overdue regardless of any new accessions. This would include streamlining decision-making processes, strengthening EU foreign policy by extending QMV, and enhancing the rule of law conditionality.

The two key sticking points in terms of reforms will be the decision-making procedures (QMV) and the guarantees for the respect of the rule of law. A large group of countries is unlikely to accept new members unless these problems are solved. However, there is also significant opposition to far reaching changes in these areas, which is likely to rise in the future. Given that unanimity is required for any meaningful changes, the EU seems to be on track for lengthy and open-ended negotiations, which will contradict the self-proclaimed urgency for geopolitically motivated bold decisions.

Given the potential disruption that the reform debate could cause, in a best-case scenario, the EU should agree on an internal reform agenda, and announce its roadmap as well as a timeline for the next steps in the enlargement process at the EU summit in December. But the EU's institutional reforms must not stand in the way of meaningful progress in the accession process and a credible perspective for the candidate countries. Prioritising internal reform before enlargement could have an adverse effect, while putting enlargement on hold until the reform agenda is complete is not likely to work. In most member states the interest in enlargement is outweighed by the concerns about the transformation that such reforms could bring about.

Recommendations

Given the geopolitical reality, time is of the essence, and the EU needs to offer a credible pathway to a deeper integration at least of the candidate countries in the next few years.

Most importantly, the EU needs to agree on a roadmap of preparations for enlargement before the European Parliament elections in June 2024. At the European Council summit in December, it should envisage the adoption of a set of reforms (resembling in scope and goal the Berlin Agenda 2000 which prepared the ground for the 2004 enlargement) to be adopted during the Polish or Danish presidencies in 2025. Such a 'Warsaw' or 'Copenhagen agenda' should outline the key reforms to the EU's budget, majority voting in some policy areas, and other policies necessary to make it fit for enlargement. Full access to the EU's budget as soon as all membership criteria are fulfilled should be a key element of the EU's offer. The next MFF (2028-2034) should therefore be prepared for the inclusion of new countries. The EU needs to pursue the economic and financial preparations regardless of whether the institutional reform is successful or not. Otherwise, its offer will lack the necessary credibility and incentives for the candidate countries to adapt.

Such an ‘Agenda 2030’ should be accompanied with an updated Copenhagen Criteria 3.0, including accession provisions such as aligning the candidate countries’ foreign policy with the main geostrategic direction of the EU. Member states should include a stipulation in the Copenhagen criteria 3.0 that bilateral issues between member states and candidate countries are to be resolved through external dispute resolution mechanisms: territorial disputes should be referred to the Arbitration Commission, while those on minority rights should be dealt with in the European Court for Human Rights and other appropriate dispute mechanisms. Bilateral issues should not be used to block countries’ negotiations to join the EU; supporters of enlargement need to insist that this is reflected in the enlargement methodology.

To avoid the enlargement agenda being held hostage by a lack of reforms, the EU needs to reach an agreement on a new commitment towards the candidate countries within the next few months. Opening accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, announcing a roadmap for institutional adaptation, and invoking a community of geopolitical interests and values, as expected at the December meeting, would not be enough to restore the credibility of the EU’s approach to enlargement. The EU should declare that regardless of the outcome of the internal reform process, it will be ready to offer the candidate countries at least participation in the single market and the green agenda, as well as access to the EU’s budget and observer status in the EU institutions no later than 2030.

This should by no means suggest that all candidate countries will automatically join such a framework in 2030. It will only be possible for those candidate countries that have fulfilled all the membership criteria and have agreed on a rule of law protection framework based upon the principle of reversibility of EU benefits with clearly defined criteria. The process would thus remain merit-based and each country would bilaterally negotiate the detailed arrangements (including transition periods) with the EU. Drawing upon proposals such as staged accession, ‘four freedoms’, or Partnership for Enlargement, these would provide maximal benefits to candidate countries before they become full members of the EU institutions – regardless of the outcome of the EU’s institutional reform discussion. Ideally, all countries – both EU members and those that fulfil the membership criteria (but do not yet have voting rights) should then negotiate a comprehensive EU reform, which could include treaty changes.

Forging such a new consensus on how to move forward will require more member states, which have so far remained quiet, to clearly formulate their positions. Under a new liberal government, it could be a pivotal country in reenergising cooperation between central Europe, the Baltic states, and the Nordic states. These countries share several of the same

positions on existing debates, including a focus on Ukraine's accession and belief that NATO enlargement is key to EU enlargement. Together these countries could form an 'enlargement policy engine', which could advocate a merit-based accession of new members and moderate EU reforms. The geopolitical imperative, strong commitment to the single market and free competition, as well as strong credentials in the EU's policy towards Ukraine could help them come up with solutions that can attract the support of other countries.

Finally, member states need to acknowledge that enlargement is not the only answer to the current geopolitical challenges that Europe is facing. Security guarantees for Ukraine and Moldova are an important part of the conversation and the EU must work closely with the US and other G7 members to develop a security partnership and provide for Ukraine's long-term military needs. This could help reconcile the positions of those that support NATO enlargement as a precondition for Ukraine's EU integration with those who oppose this.

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[1] Authors' interviews with German policymakers, Berlin, May-June 2023.

[2] Unpublished Austrian paper, "Advancing gradual integration for the Western Balkans", September 2023.

[3] Authors' interviews with policymakers in EU states, September 2023.

[4] Authors' conversations with diplomatic sources, October 2023.

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