

EU enlargement – Moving forward with pragmatism

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Abstract

A credible EU enlargement policy remains necessary from a geopolitical perspective, but can only succeed through a more pragmatic and gradual integration approach. New members amplify the existing challenges to EU decision making, rule-of-law conditionality and political cohesion, particularly given the circumstances of Russian aggression, hybrid threats and rising nationalist and far-right forces within the Union. Against this backdrop, the highly heterogeneous situations of the Western Balkan states, Ukraine, Moldova and other candidate countries, the unresolved bilateral conflicts, domestic polarisation and relative poverty all shape public scepticism in current member states. This paper rejects 'buffer-zone' concepts as a form of capitulation, and instead advocates stepwise integration into the single market, Schengen and selected policies, tied to verifiable reforms, reversible conditionality, and strengthened financial and political support. Such a model would allow differentiated, reversible accession pathways, while giving the EU time to reform its own institutions and decision-making rules, ensuring that enlargement reinforces, rather than undermines, the Union's capacity to act and its foundational values.

Keywords: EU enlargement, Western Balkans, Gradual integration, Rule of law and conditionality, Russian aggression and hybrid threats

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Ever since my early youth, I have had a special – above all emotional – relationship with the countries of Eastern Europe. For me, only a Europe that encompasses both ‘West’ and ‘East’ is the ‘true’ Europe. As I noted in my Europe diary for 1999/2000: ‘We must not forget that one of the essential foundations of today’s European Union was and is the victory over fascism. Enlargement, on the other hand, is closely linked to the failure of communism. And just as the founding of the EU served to consolidate the defeat of fascism, so enlargement serves to stabilise the successful overcoming of communism.’ This process unfortunately has not unfolded as planned, and is by no means complete. The same applies to the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova. It is important, as I have always emphasised in this context, ‘that there is no room in the EU for racism and xenophobia, nor for nationalism and contempt for minorities ... And only a country that agrees to this fundamental principle can become an EU member.’ But if these prerequisites are met, nothing should stand in the way of any European state’s accession.

SPECIAL CASES: TURKEY AND RUSSIA

There is certainly no convincing or rational argument for why some European states should fundamentally belong to the EU and others not. There are borderline cases, however, and the two most prominent are Russia and Turkey. Following much hesitation and lengthy deliberation, Turkey was granted candidate status. But the country has increasingly distanced itself from Europe and its values. Moreover, in many EU member states – including Austria – scepticism of Turkey’s accession has never disappeared. As rapporteur for Turkey, on the one hand I supported opening negotiations with it; but on the other I argued that, if sufficient progress did not occur soon, a different form of close strategic cooperation should be pursued. We have long reached that point, but neither side wishes to take the first step toward an alternative cooperation model. A clear but close relationship is urgently needed to stabilise the eastern Mediterranean and resolve the Cyprus question.

As for Russia, it was an illusion from the start to envision EU membership for such a vast country that encompasses large swathes of Asia. Aside from Russia’s various aggressive acts against its neighbours and the brutal war of aggression against Ukraine, its president, Vladimir Putin, views the European Union as his main enemy. He wages a battle that – in the eyes of Russia’s leadership – pits Orthodox Christian civilisation, with its conservative values, against a decadent and weak Europe; here he is partly in agreement with Donald Trump, JD Vance and Marco Rubio. The war against Ukraine and the various hybrid attacks on EU states are all part of this confrontation. Unfortunately, this also eliminates any EU future for Belarus under Alexander Lukashenko, who has made himself increasingly dependent on Vladimir Putin.

MULTIPLE CHALLENGES OF EU ENLARGEMENT

In my view, all other European states are entitled to apply for accession and to join the EU at the appropriate juncture. But every accession also changes the EU and its decision-making processes. This makes the issue particularly complex. Each country has its own specific interests that it wants to advance, as well as particular problems that create difficulties for other members or for the EU as a whole. In EU voting – especially where unanimity is required – new members and their veto rights can create fresh obstacles to the Union's ability to act. Recently, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama wrote in a joint article entitled 'A Realistic Path to the EU' (*FAZ*, 28 February 2026): 'Concerns about decision-making, institutional balance and political cohesion are legitimate.'¹

New members do not introduce qualitatively new challenges, but they do increase the likelihood of blockades and reduce Europe's capacity to act swiftly and in unison. Solutions must be found to curtail the unanimity principle without causing splits in the EU through excessive majority voting on key foreign- and security-policy matters. Simply having new members waive their veto rights for an extended period is unlikely to be sufficient. Another fundamental issue for the EU regarding enlargement is that even if countries meet all the accession criteria before joining, they may later violate many of them. Hungary offers several examples, with its current conspicuous breaches of EU law and blockades of strategic decisions, such as support for Ukraine.

On the one hand, the European Union is currently casting around for a clear political direction based on the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, while on the other it is countering Russian aggression against Ukraine and hybrid attacks on several European states. In its search for a clear policy on democracy and human rights, the bloc faces awkward partners not only in Hungary, Slovakia and (to some extent) Poland: similar forces are also in positions of strength in many other countries and in the European Parliament.

Added to this is the need to defend against unfair trade measures from the Trump administration and the flooding of the market with cheap Chinese goods. At the same time, Europe must reposition itself more squarely in international competition – especially in research, development and innovation. The burgeoning right is blocking many essential measures or is failing to contribute to the strengthening of Europe's industrial policy. Moreover, it often represents the interests of right-wing forces that are ideologically aligned with the US, rather than with Europe.

None of these open problems and priority tasks represents a fundamental argument against letting in new members. Nevertheless, admitting new members with full rights and obligations before the EU's own political and economic orientation is clarified and the corresponding organisational structures are in place is risky and must at least be carefully considered and prepared for.

The EU must define its own future and know whether new members align with it. Candidate countries must also examine this for themselves. Our future is uncertain, with fresh challenges always arising that will require new answers. But the EU must at least be certain about the value foundations on which decisions are to be made in the next decade, and must be confident that these are based on collective considerations.

¹ <https://reporteri.net/en/NEWS/Rama-Vucic-with-new-ideas-for-integration--access-to-the-European-market-and-Schengen-without-immediate-membership/>

CAPITULATION OR CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

Once they join, the individual EU accession candidates would present very different and variably complex challenges for the EU's future. These challenges are fundamentally manageable, but they should not be underestimated. One should not forget that the critical conditions in these candidates – such as internal societal or ethnically charged political conflict, especially conflict or even war with neighbours – are clearly perceived by the public in the EU member states.

Many advocates of accession assume that EU membership would help resolve those conflicts. That may indeed be the case, but these conflicts and their consequences could also be transferred into the EU, becoming problems and crises for the EU as a whole. Many people fear this. Additionally, the countries in question are poorer and will demand corresponding financial support. Independent of finances, their relative poverty means they enjoy less emotional support from among the populations of wealthier countries. Few people know these countries from (vacation) travel. Scepticism or rejection of enlargement is further fuelled politically by extreme nationalist circles. In this context, the Austrian Society for European Politics in 2025 sought proposals from Georg Vobruba, Professor of Sociology at the University of Leipzig, on how to address the issue. As the title of his paper suggests, for Vobruba southern and eastern EU enlargement is a 'mission impossible'.² He notes that it is geopolitically necessary, but not really feasible, since he fears it could prolong the current war or create new risks of war. He proposes upgrading buffer zones into peace-building intermediate zones. This is nothing less than capitulation in the face of the task of creating a common Europe of freedom and prosperity. Instead of capitulation, new ideas and procedures are needed for how the EU can address elements of these challenges. First, however, a look at the specific problems of individual accession candidates.

COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY ANALYSIS

Among the Balkan countries, seemingly only Albania is currently pursuing a relatively clear course. It has not managed to secure a common European policy across its two major parties, but many necessary reforms have been implemented. The second candidate often deemed ready for accession, Montenegro, is deeply divided between forces that look to Belgrade or Moscow and those oriented toward Europe.

Serbia itself, under authoritarian President Aleksandar Vučić, is walking a tightrope between Moscow, Brussels and Washington. The massive demonstrations against Vučić's opaque and authoritarian policies have so far not led to any weakening of the Vučić system, though many observers believe it has feet of clay. Vučić benefits from the fact that the opposition is leaderless and indecisive. The leadership of Kosovo has grown in stature following the recent elections, but Prime Minister Albin Kurti has entrenched himself in a policy that offers no hope of constructive talks with Serbia.

North Macedonia is primarily hampered in its progress toward EU membership by Bulgarian nationalist demands, but the country is doing precious little to contribute to a resolution of the conflict with Bulgaria. With Bulgaria mired in constant elections with fragile outcomes, there is little prospect of its making any meaningful contribution to resolving the bilateral conflict.

² <https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/mission-almost-impossible-dilemmas-of-a-southern-and-eastern-enlargement-of-the-european-union/>

Bosnia and Herzegovina has failed to take key steps toward the creation of a fully functioning state – and thus toward EU accession talks. The main culprit is Republika Srpska's former president, Milorad Dodik, who is unflagging in the pursuit of his self-serving goals – including on the economic front – and who recently drew sympathy and support from Washington. Other ethno-nationalist forces prioritise their immediate voters over the interests of the common state.

Moldova recently displayed stiff resistance in the face of a massive Russian attempt to influence its elections. Yet a relatively large population segment remains emotionally tied to Moscow and is being manipulated from there. There is also an unresolved relationship issue with the country's large neighbour Romania, which shares a very similar language.

The greatest challenges arise from Ukraine's understandable accession aspirations. The country's size and agricultural structure pose immediate accession issues. Moreover, Ukraine would join as a nation that is deeply traumatised. New internal conflicts will emerge – not least between those who stayed to defend the country and those who fled abroad, only to return after a ceasefire. Discussions will also arise on whether (and how) to build a new relationship with neighbouring Russia, which will have annexed parts of Ukrainian territory.

All these questions and disputes directly concern the EU. On the other hand, Ukraine is already aligning its economy more closely with the EU (see a recent wiiw study)³ and can provide the bloc with huge defence-policy and technological benefits. One could almost say that Ukraine is essential for the establishment of an effective European defence strategy and capacity: no one else has such experience. But for Europe, it must always be about deterrence and defence in order to preserve peace, rather than about revenge. The key question is thus not whether, but when and how enlargement should occur. Candidates face different problems and challenges, so they cannot be treated equally in terms of either their progress or their timing, and nor can they join simultaneously. The EU faces a fundamental challenge: how to counter Russian hybrid warfare and influence, especially in candidate countries? How to prevent Russia (and possibly China) from exploiting and stoking existing conflicts? How to avoid having Russia (or China) exacerbate the divisions between EU and non-EU members in order to create fresh animosities?

COURAGE FOR NEW PATHS

In order to avoid giving Russia or China an easy ride – all countries that are willing should rapidly become associated with and in the EU. Most commentators see single-market participation as the decisive first integration step. In their joint article, Vučić and Rama also advocate 'accelerated integration of prepared candidate countries into the single market and the Schengen Area'.⁴ Given Europe's security situation, I would furthermore seek political union, which – in light of the Russian aggression – would also cover defence policy. What is needed is movement toward economic integration beyond the single market – and financial support – tailored to each country's economic conditions.

³ <https://wiiw.ac.at/structural-shifts-in-ukraine-s-foreign-trade-and-investment-and-implications-for-eu-ukraine-relations-p-7522.html>

⁴ <https://reporteri.net/en/NEWS/Rama-Vucic-with-new-ideas-for-integration--access-to-the-European-market-and-Schengen-without-immediate-membership/>

Vučić and Rama emphasise that the first integration step would leave the EU's institutional framework unchanged: 'It would not imply the granting of veto rights, additional commissioners, additional members of the European Parliament or changes to voting structures.'⁵

The EU should thus develop two strategies: a general structure encompassing all candidates and the EU itself, in order to unite all European countries; and tailored integration and support steps for candidates and the EU. Depending on reforms and economic/political developments, integration steps should lead to full membership. In parallel, the EU must deliberate and implement its own reforms – a key prerequisite that new full members ought to sign up to.

For some time, experts from the European Policy Centre in Belgrade (CEP-Belgrade) and the Centre for European Policy Studies in Brussels (CEPS-Brussels) have been proposing such a new enlargement strategy: a stepwise integration process before full membership. This would allow candidates to gradually draw closer and to integrate, while at the same time offering the EU the chance to assess reform implementation – rather than just rely on promises. It is crucial to verify whether candidates take the EU values and principles seriously. In the event of persistent failure or violation, candidates could be downgraded or the process halted. Parallel mechanisms for bilateral issues should prevent disruptions.

Stefan Lehne, Zoran Nechev and Richard Grievesson argue for something similar in their Carnegie Endowment paper 'Access Before Accession: Rethinking the EU's Gradual Integration'.⁶ They posit that 'A step-by-step opening of the union's programs and policies, linked to concrete reforms and supported by greater EU financial assistance' would avoid traditional enlargement pitfalls. This would require greater EU flexibility and varying engagement/integration levels – more pragmatism to address countries' needs and capacities. Ideally, stepwise integration would dovetail with the accession negotiation progress.

The process must be designed so that both sides can prepare as best they possibly can for future accession. It should not be disrupted by bilateral conflicts or member vetoes; and this applies to parallel accession talks, too. Final accession would require the approval of all member states and a majority vote in the European Parliament.

Enlargement is complex and should not be led solely by officials and experts. It needs broad media engagement and personal connections between EU members and candidates. I have used such long-term ties in my professional work – and I continue to do so. My EU Parliament successors do the same – as do many people from business, academia and the cultural sphere who could intensify this process.

⁵ <https://reporteri.net/en/NEWS/Rama-Vucic-with-new-ideas-for-integration--access-to-the-European-market-and-Schengen-without-immediate-membership/>

⁶ https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Lehne%20et%20al_Gradual%20integration.pdf

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