



How to make EU enlargement work? A grass-roots approach to strategic preparations

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Abstract

Enlargement is back on the EU agenda. Leaders have broken long-established foreign policy taboos by green-lighting accession talks with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, and by awarding EU candidate country status to Georgia. This bold step has elevated the expectations of the existing candidate countries, instilling renewed optimism in the Western Balkans Six. At the same time, the EU has recognised the need to carry out its own reforms to be prepared to integrate potentially 10 new member states.

However, given the complexities of EU institutional reform, coupled with the uncertain political context, expectations of EU enlargement may lead to disillusionment. This article argues that the EU should not tie its progress on institutional reform too closely to its enlargement policy and that it needs to take a grass-roots approach to enlargement. It should focus on strengthening horizontal cooperation, enhancing efficiency and increasing public involvement in the EU enlargement process.

Keywords

EU enlargement, Institutional reform, Grass-roots approach

The return of EU enlargement

There is a new permissive consensus emerging among EU policymakers and scholars that the EU's enlargement policy has been reborn with a geopolitical focus. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU has begun to regard potential enlargement not

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merely as a facet of foreign policy but as a strategic tool to assert its role by expanding into regions of geopolitical significance. This foreign policy shift has led most member states to view enlargement as a way to address geopolitical challenges and reinforce the EU's position in its immediate neighbourhood.

Leaders of countries that had previously shown little enthusiasm for enlargement have visibly changed their stance. 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 the EU should enlarge but how it should do so, adding that the EU should admit new countries 'as swiftly as possible' (Macron 2023). German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, addressing the European Parliament, advocated for a geopolitically stronger and redefined EU, emphasising that the initiative is not about altruism but about securing a lasting peace in Europe in the wake of Russia's war of aggression (European Parliament 2023). Meanwhile, the European Commission president has boldly asserted that completing the Union is a 'call of history' and the 'natural horizon' for the EU (European Commission 2023d).

Clear evidence of the EU's geopolitical rationale in its enlargement doctrine was demonstrated at a historic summit in December, when EU leaders endorsed the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, and the granting of candidate status to Georgia (European Council 2023). The decision—made in the shadow of Russia's brutal war—heralds a new era in EU enlargement policy, one which will redefine the EU's geography and political destiny.

Two years ago, the countries of the Eastern Trio (Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova) could hardly dream of the prospect of EU enlargement that they acquired in June 2022, much less of EU membership itself. Over the past decade, the trio had been constantly reminded that neither the Eastern Partnership policy nor the Association Agreements, despite the latter's advanced economic and political incentives, included the prospect of membership. Now, these nations find themselves grouped together with the six Western Balkan countries in the same enlargement cohort.

This U-turn has created the impression that enlargement fatigue is over, elevating the expectations of the Western Balkan countries, which have been waiting in the EU's antechamber for the past two decades. However, the fast-track advancement of the Eastern Trio has also created a sense of competition and doubt. Some Western Balkan leaders are growing increasingly frustrated that Ukraine is 'leapfrogging' their countries in the EU accession process, adding further delays to their decades-long efforts to join the bloc (Dunai and Johnston 2023). This sentiment introduces an additional level of pressure on EU leaders to handle the enlargement process for both the Western Balkans and the Eastern Trio with the same political and technical rigour. It is within this context of heightened pressure that the EU has opted to launch a €6 billion growth plan for the Western Balkans, which will also pave the way for their gradual integration. The growth plan offers an incentive for opening up the Western Balkans' markets, leading to integration in the single market, contingent upon their alignment with single market regulations (European Commission 2023c).

The heightened geopolitical rationale for enlargement has intensified the level of politicisation and shifted the decision-making process further into the realm of political bargaining. Up until the last moments of the December EU summit, the Council's decision to green-light accession talks with Ukraine had stalled. The deadlock was resolved when Hungary was allocated €10.2 billion of previously frozen funds (European Commission 2023a), setting the precedent that future decisions on EU enlargement negotiations are likely to involve a process whereby countries increasingly leverage the EU through coercive means. This pattern, while not unknown to the EU, underscores the risk that the 'vetocracy' may become more pronounced with the addition of 10 new members.

Indeed, with the potential addition of 10 new countries, the enlargement of the EU is set to profoundly influence its balance of power, voting rights, decision-making processes and key policies, raising legitimate questions about EU governability. Yet, when discussing institutional reforms as a potential remedy, a closer examination is needed to see whether institutional solutions can address problems that are inherently political.

Is the EU's governance ready for EU enlargement?

Institutional considerations: impacts on the European Parliament, Commission and Council

There is currently no defined concept of 'EU absorption capacity', nor criteria for measuring its readiness for enlargement. Despite this, external and internal pressures, including the quest for strategic autonomy, the capacity to act and react to the 'permacrisis', and grass-roots demand from citizens, as evidenced by the Conference on the Future of Europe, highlight the urgent need for EU institutional reforms to make enlargement feasible.

Institutionally, integrating new member states will alter the European Parliament's composition, expand the Commission's size and modify the Council's decision-making process. Budget-wise, it is expected to affect crucial policies such as the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), the Common Agricultural Policy and cohesion funds.

Among the debates on EU institutional reforms, the most advanced proposal is the 'Franco-German' paper, which recommends a set of reforms to prepare EU institutions for enlargement. These include increasing the EU budget, strictly tying EU disbursements to rule-of-law compliance, transitioning from unanimity to majority voting in the Council and creating a new watchdog to safeguard the financial integrity of EU institutional personnel (Costa et al. 2023).

However, it is highly likely that the critical determinant for these institutional reforms is the political will of the member states. For example, the accession of new countries would increase the number of Members of the European Parliament, yet the Franco-German paper suggests capping their number at 751. This move, achievable without treaty amendments, would, however, necessitate unanimous European Council consent. Politically, this presents a challenge, because it suggests a reduction in representation for

certain countries, which goes against the overall political incentive for the member states (and future member states) to increase national representation.

The EU's enlargement also prompts considerations regarding the operational efficiency of the European Commission. Adhering to the principle of one commissioner per member state could lead to an inflated Commission, creating an imbalance between significant and minor portfolios and challenging the principle of collegiality. The paper suggests relying on Article 17(5) of the Treaty on European Union, which allows the European Council to decide to adopt the system outlined in the Lisbon Treaty, thereby reducing the college's size to a figure corresponding to that of two-thirds of the member states. However, garnering the political will for such a change seems less certain, especially given the Commission's increasingly political and geopolitical role on the one hand, and the member states' attachment to their representatives at the European Commission on the other (Lehne 2023, 4).

The most sensitive area to be impacted by accession is the Council's decision-making process. Each new member introduces potential veto powers, complicating the achievement of unanimity. Although most legislative proposals are made under the Ordinary Legislative Procedure, requiring a qualified-majority vote, areas such as taxation, justice and home affairs, and the MFF still depend on unanimity. The report suggests broadening the scope of qualified-majority voting (QMV), and introducing a 'sovereignty safety net' to allow member states to declare their vital national interests in the few decisions within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) that already utilise QMV. In new QMV areas, if a member state deems its vital national interests at stake, it could formally declare this, requesting that the issue is transferred to the Council in order to voice its concerns and seek consensus at the highest political level. This clause could lead to ongoing disagreements about the essence of legitimate concern, which might result in a return to the Luxembourg Compromise (Cloos 2023, 5). Even if such measures were theoretically accepted by some member states, concerns linger over the legitimacy of foreign-policy decisions made by QMV. The challenge lies in ensuring that the use of QMV does not result in polarisation and politicisation, while also advocating for negotiation and fostering a voting culture that allows a transition from a consensus-based approach to a majority voting culture.

Budgetary considerations

The discussions around the financial implications of EU enlargement are steadily gaining traction, sparked by a study from the Council's General Secretariat which estimates that Ukraine's accession could cost approximately €186 billion over seven years. The study suggests that Ukraine could qualify for €96.5 billion in Common Agricultural Policy funds over a seven-year EU budget period, potentially leading to a reduction of about 20% in farm subsidies for current EU member states (Foy 2023).

Furthermore, on the subject of potentially including economically weaker countries such as Ukraine or Moldova in the Union, concerns are rising about the potential reduction

of cohesion funds for the wealthier regions. This has led regional leaders to voice their concerns and, in response, the European Committee of the Regions has requested a comprehensive evaluation by the European Commission before new regulations for post-2027 cohesion policy are introduced (Committee of the Regions 2023).

Critics of the study argue that, in reality, the financial impact of enlargement could be less significant due to the inherent adaptation mechanisms within the EU's MFF that are designed to mitigate significant fluctuations (Lindner et al. 2023). Accession is not expected to take place within the current MFF, and for the next MFF, spanning 2028–34, detailed discussion is required on specific aspects of the framework and the strategies that could be used to mitigate costs.

Overall, there is a lack of clarity about the financial impact of EU enlargement. The discussions and estimations regarding the financial implications of expanding the EU should intensify to accurately assess the economic effects of this expansion. These debates should also help distinguish between the accession processes for Ukraine and those for the Western Balkan countries, Moldova and Georgia. Unlike Ukraine and Turkey, the majority of the current EU candidate countries possess relatively small agricultural sectors. The integration of nations with smaller economies and populations is expected to have a lesser budgetary impact compared to that of Ukraine.

The debates are currently in the preliminary stages, with the European Commission expected to present a Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews by Spring 2024 (European Commission 2023b). These reviews will examine the potential impacts of an expanded Union on both various policies and the functionality of European institutions, including budgetary policy. It is likely that these reports will be predominantly qualitative. However, considering that political negotiations will influence budgetary negotiations, the political context, which will be significantly affected by the upcoming European Parliament elections, should be factored in.

European Parliament elections and EU enlargement

The progress of EU institutional and policy reforms will be shaped by the political landscape that emerges from the European Parliament elections. While it is widely anticipated that centrist pro-European parties (i.e. the European People's Party, the Socialists and Democrats, Renew, the Greens) will secure a majority in the forthcoming European Parliament (2024–9), albeit with a reduced margin compared to 2019, an improved performance by populist factions could jeopardise the transition to the new EU institutional leadership (Borges de Castro et al. 2024, 10). Such a scenario could precipitate a governance crisis within the Union, adversely affecting the trajectory of EU enlargement.

Election forecasts suggest a shift towards a more right-leaning Parliament after the June 2024 elections, indicative of the wider political realignment across Europe. Current opinion polls, in comparison to the 2019 election results, show increased support for populist and anti-EU parties (Cunningham et al. 2024, 1–19). These parties often view

further enlargement sceptically and their growing influence could make the enlargement process more challenging, especially with regard to supporting Ukraine. For instance, the electoral victory of the Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid) in the Netherlands poses questions about Dutch financial and military support for Ukraine, given that the party's leader Geert Wilders, like Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, is against stronger EU sanctions on Russia and hesitant to support Kyiv politically or militarily.

Public opinion on EU enlargement is polarised, exhibiting a clear division between the older and the newer EU member states. A recent Eurobarometer survey indicates that while 53% of respondents are in favour of EU expansion (European Union 2023), the level of support significantly diverges across member states. Poland, for instance, demonstrates robust backing (67%) for enlargement, in stark contrast to the more sceptical stance observed in longstanding members such as France (35%) and Germany (42%). Yet, support should not be taken for granted, due to the possibility of electoral volatility. The prominence of the EU's future and its possible enlargement in electoral campaigns remains uncertain. Both populist and mainstream political parties may exploit public concerns over identity, cost, migration and security to critically examine the direction of EU enlargement.

How to prepare strategically: towards a grass-roots approach

The trajectory of EU enlargement will unfold within a geopolitical context, shaped by political decisions and institutional reforms. Although the geopolitics of enlargement has elevated the policy on the EU agenda, further progress seems to depend on there being a strong political will in favour of it, which may prove uncertain. Therefore, to ensure the success of EU enlargement, progress should not be exclusively linked to EU institutional reforms. To prevent the enlargement process from being sidelined by geopolitical bargaining and to avoid risking the overstretching of the Union's capabilities, the EU should adopt a grass-roots approach. This would maintain the EU's normative role in guiding the enlargement process while simultaneously managing expectations.

This approach should focus on three principal areas: enhancing horizontal cooperation among EU institutions, improving the operational efficiency of enlargement processes and increasing public engagement with EU enlargement.

First, to enhance horizontal cooperation, the EU needs to consolidate and coordinate the external representation of enlargement messaging and narratives across its institutions. The current external perception of the EU's enlargement stance as fragmented leads to confusion among the candidate countries, which often have more centralised approaches to foreign policy. Establishing a strategic consensus on coherent external representation will also require a clear definition of roles and responsibilities within the EU's intricate governance framework and a reduction of institutional rivalry in foreign policy representation. The organisation of an inter-institutional conference by the new

leadership could be a strategic step towards achieving these goals. Moreover, the European Political Community could further enhance the EU's external representation by offering a platform on which to develop and reinforce its unified stance.

The second pillar should prioritise the operational efficiency of EU enlargement methodology. The inclusion of new countries with varying levels of readiness in the enlargement framework calls for a dynamic and responsive methodology that combines geopolitical imperatives with a merit-based approach. Mechanisms should also be devised that would prevent the candidate countries from backsliding in the area of the rule of law. In this respect, including the candidate countries in a rule-of-law review is the first step forward. Furthermore, their alignment with the EU's CFSP will become increasingly important amid geopolitical shifts. A new methodology should prioritise CFSP alignment as a fundamental element of the enlargement process, ensuring that candidate countries are integrated into the EU's broader geopolitical framework.

Finally, a grass-roots strategy should prioritise enhancing strategic communication about EU enlargement in the candidate countries and increasing public engagement in the process. To address the varied perceptions of EU membership, including its costs and benefits, a direct and inclusive dialogue with citizens is necessary, alongside mechanisms to incorporate public input into the enlargement process. Leveraging the untapped potential of the European political parties as conduits between the EU's political sphere and the public in the candidate countries should be explored.

Conclusion

The EU's enlargement policy, widely regarded as one of its most successful initiatives, has received renewed geopolitical momentum. EU policymakers are determined to ensure that the enlargement process exemplifies a model of success, recognising it as a strategic investment in peace, security, stability and economic prosperity. However, despite the current momentum, the process is vulnerable to delays stemming from the potential for excessive politicisation. The advancement of EU enlargement risks becoming overly entangled with the debates surrounding EU institutional reforms, which are subject to the variable political will of the EU member states. The feasibility of these reforms is contingent upon several factors, including the steadfast political commitment of member states, the outcomes of the European Parliament elections and the preparedness of the candidate countries.

In light of these factors, the EU must recognise the critical importance of leveraging the current momentum to realise substantial progress. This requires the adoption of a grass-roots strategy, involving more profound engagement with societal stakeholders and political entities to cultivate a more inclusive and participatory approach to enlargement. Such engagement will also strengthen the understanding of and support for the EU integration process among citizens.

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