

European Policy Review

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Editors' Note

Ukraine, Serbia, Georgia, and Romania are just some of the EU member or candidate countries that in the last twelve months have faced major unrest, whether due to an armed foreign invasion, mass protests or electoral irregularities. In the face of these events, the European enlargement process can act as a tool to strengthen the European Union both from the inside and the outside. However, as the EU is continuing to evolve, its structure institutional setting, and decision-making mechanisms will need to further adapt to include current candidate countries and accommodate members' requests.

In this year's edition of the European Policy Review, young researchers are engaging in a conversation over the potential opportunities and challenges that surround the EU enlargement process. We are proud to publish eight contributions that cover topics as diverse as pre-accession assistance, institutional reform, defence policy, anti-corruption, media discourses on enlargement, elite rhetoric, fragmentation, and phased integration. Additionally, we are excited to share the winning submission of this year's edition of the European Policy Prize. We would like to thank everyone that made this year's EPR possible, including the writers, peer reviewers, and editors.

Giulia Cera and Anne Noël

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Foreword by Prof. Michela Ceccorulli

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The Future of the EU enlargement process is one of those topics that never ceases to attract scholarly interest. This is quite intuitive: the European Union has developed as a political entity via enlargement phases, transforming itself, reshaping the contours of its physical and cognitive borders, widening the space of its action and the amount of its population, offering and receiving opportunities and sharing challenges with would-be members.

Throughout this process, it has incorporated diversity, from a variety of perspectives: different languages, uses, economic models and political traditions. Considered a richness, this diversity is now seen through different lenses: some wonder if, with a view of the complex global scenario and geopolitical shifts we are witnessing, this diversity is more a liability than an asset.

But could the EU stop enlarging? Would it not lose its inherent proclivity to expand itself to whoever is attracted by its many magnets? Or, to the contrary, is the enlargement process inevitably at odds with more integration?

Commissioner Marta Kos has made clear that enlargement will definitely be under the radar of the new Commission. But where should we need to look to understand the drivers and determinants of this new outburst? Negotiations have been going on for years with states in the Western Balkans, with soaring critical voices. Some others for long on the waiting list, have re-imagined themselves elsewhere (Turkey). Indeed, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has triggered new dynamics and states before part of the Eastern Partnership have now been upgraded to candidates. Here too, though, uncertainty looms large and the scholarly debate is divided as ever on questions of plausibility, appropriateness and, mostly, the meaning of this new assertiveness.

Against this backdrop, the 2025 Edition of the EPR sheds light on different aspects of the European enlargement process, providing fresh insights for research.

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The Impact of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance on Democratic Values and the Rule of Law in Western Balkan Countries

A Case Study of Judicial Independence in Serbia

Francesco Cautiero

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Abstract

This paper analyses the impact of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) on the promotion of democratic values and the rule of law in Serbia, with a specific emphasis on judicial independence. As Serbia aims to join the European Union, it is essential to observe EU standards, especially in the area of judicial reforms. The research investigates how Serbia's progress in establishing an independent judiciary is influenced by the perception of reachable benefits, EU support to meet pre-conditions, and the EU's commitment to Serbia associated with the IPA. The study uses mainly a literature-based approach focusing on documents adopted by relevant stakeholders such as the European Commission, Serbia's government bodies, the European External Action Service, as well as external and independent consultants. The aim is to assess the effectiveness of IPA support in promoting institutional reforms. The mixed findings, along with other external factors, will stimulate further analysis of these issues and other case studies in the Balkan region. The paper concludes with proposals to address the current issues affecting Serbia's judiciary, taking into account the expected future of the region.

Keywords

Serbia, European Union, Enlargement, Rule of Law, Judicial Independence

Introduction

The creation and development of a never-experienced supranational entity, often referred to as a "sui generis" international body, has been stimulating the production of theories and studies since the inception of the European Union (EU) in the '50s. One of the most interesting topics since the establishment of the three European Communities has been the enlargement process. The main matter that member states had to answer is which country is truly eligible and deserving to be a part of the Community? This issue does not only concern factors

such as economic indexes or the alignment with EU standards, but it is also about an overarching question: Which country is truly European? This, in turn, raises another issue: Does a real European identity exist? The history of enlargement and the related literature provide only a partial answer.

At the same time, the debate surrounding the EU's identity and enlargement is directly linked with the struggle of candidate states to join the Union, namely aligning with the standards and conditions set by the EU institutions. Over the past two decades, several states, with varying degrees of difficulty, have still undergone the membership process, enabling the Community's expansion. Currently, the Balkan region is the last piece of Europe missing from the Union, thus raising new questions about the possibility of the Balkan states finally joining the EU. The slow enlargement process regarding this region has become the principal question about whether the EU is correctly pursuing its accession procedure (Mladineo et al., 2019). In the last seventy years, the EU has adopted different approaches to ensure an effective enlargement strategy across the differing regions (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2006). As it will be explored in the following sections, it has always been difficult to detach from functionalist, rationalist and utility-maximization theories and to focus on the establishment of a common European identity – and, in general, a constructivist approach – as a pillar of a new enlargement strategy. The same could be claimed for the candidate states, which have seen EU membership as an opportunity to access several benefits such as the single market, no border control, free movement of goods and services among others (Dimitrova, 2024). Consequently, EU expansion has been a matter of interest and cost-benefit calculation, which will continue to shape the actions of the EU, based mainly on conditionality. Nevertheless, the current struggles of the Balkan states and the related “enlargement fatigue” have raised questions about whether a newfound approach is needed.

Besides the internal issues of the Balkan region, the EU has always had a distinct relationship with Serbia, which has held a more influential position over its neighbours since the medieval era (Republic of Serbia, n.d.). As a result, the EU has adopted a different approach toward the WBCs compared to the one it had with Central or Northern European countries due to their peculiar internal conditions, which have always required special attention. It is clear that the EU must pay special attention to accomplish the same result now if it wishes Serbia to join (European Parliament, 2025).

Ultimately, the success of future enlargements may depend not only on the candidates' ability to meet technical benchmarks but also on the EU's willingness to embrace a more inclusive and flexible understanding of European identity—one that acknowledges historical complexities and regional specificities while reaffirming the core values that bind the Union together.

Literature review

One of the most influential works about enlargement is the one developed by Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier in the early 2000s. In their dissertation, Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier (2002) offered an analysis of the enlargement process using rationalist and constructivist approaches. The former affirms that costs and benefits determine the result of the application by potential members; the ultimate goal is to maximise the expected outcomes of both member states and third-state decisions. In other words, a member state is favourable to accepting an outsider into the EU, and the outsider state is eager to strengthen its institutional connections with the organisation only under the assumption that the benefits gained from the expansion will be positive and surpass the costs of both parties. European institutions adopted this approach since the first enlargement rounds and still refuse to detach from it. From the opposite perspective, constructivist theory explains enlargement toward a sociological lens, which does not start from actors' preferences but from an "organisational" level. Enlargement decisions, according to its supporters, are based on cultural factors intended, in this context, as the "community" or "cultural match" which signifies the level of shared collective identity and fundamental beliefs among both members and non-members. Even so, these methods do not explain how values and identity would affect both EU member and candidate states behaviours, if at all. At the same time, Risse (2005) addressed the topic of collective identity from the point of view of the neofunctionalist theory. More specifically, he started from the studies of Ernst B. Haas and Karl W. Deutsch, who included identity-related concepts in their work on European integration (Haas, 1958; Deutsch, 1968). Neo-functional theory is founded on two strands: functional spill-over and political spill-over. During the former, placing a specific sector under the authority of a supranational institution provokes pressures to expand the competence of that institution to related policy areas. Following the functional spill-over, there is the political spill-over, where both supranational and national actors advocate for additional power expansion for further integration to accomplish their political interests. At the sub-national level, interest groups welcome the gains of integration, transferring their demands and expectations to the new centre. At the supranational level, the institutions would similarly upgrade the common interest, encouraging the transfer of loyalties and supporting European policies and solutions (Wolf, 1973). About transferring competencies, Haas (1958) discussed the idea of "shifting loyalties" toward supranational institutions, while Deutsch (1968) integrated the concept of "sense of community" into his understanding of integration. He suggested that collective identity plays a significant role in the integration process, even though it was not clear how identity formation would relate to it. While they shared the idea that collective identification with the community was a measure of integration, Haas didn't believe that a common identity was the EU integration starting point. He suggested that the interests of specific national groups dominate the community formation, which in turn affects the benefits created by the transfer of competencies leading in turn to the creation of a common identity. In other words, integration is still driven by instrumental rationality but with an orientation to supranational solutions since they represent the best ones to promote their interests. Values and ideas are fundamental parts of actors' interests, but the identification with European values is not a necessary precondition for integration. The increasing identification with the "new

The increasing identification with the “new center” caused by the creation of a common supranational solution creates further integration.

Fifty years after the publication of Haas’s work, the exploration of European identity has become a central focus in European studies. According to Risse (2005), Haas correctly addressed the concept of multiple loyalties, but the European identity formation should not necessarily be faced as the decrease or the replacement of national ones. In this case, nations and Europe can be defined as “imagined communities” where individuals can be part of both without diminishing or cancelling the other one. There are two ways to think about multiple identities. First, identities can be nested like Russian Matryoshka dolls. Nevertheless, a sense of hierarchy between the sense of belonging of people is still present. In this case, the EU defines the exterior border while regions or nations compose the core. Second, the conceptualization of the link between the EU and national identities can be addressed according to the “marble cake” model. Here, it is not possible to separate and hierarchically organize an individual’s identities since one condition of the model is that European identity might mean different things to different people. For example, admission to the EU might provoke a profound change in the national identity and the meaning that people gave to it before membership. In the “marble cake” model, the EU identity is connected with existing national identities, leading to divergent identity results.

Besides Risse’s work, Džankić et al. (2019) based their work on the studies made by Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier (2002). According to them, the concept of Europeanisation has become crucial for understanding the transformative dynamics of norm transfer between states and the EU. The fatigue of the accession for the Western Balkan Countries (WBCs) is based on their difficulties in addressing the transformative period from the communist regime to the liberal one, alongside fights in the WBCs linked to their national identities. Europeanisation is seen as a two-way process: it involves not only the domestic adaptation to EU norms, laws, and rules (top-down) but also domestic situations can shape the dynamics of Europeanisation (bottom-up). Even though the authors did not refer directly to enlargement, their definition of Europeanisation closely matches what is intended as a policy of “defining the EU identity”. Additionally, they also use the constructivist institutionalist ideas elaborated by Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier earlier in the 2000s. Džankić et al. (2019) also offer a new paradigm known as the “lesson-drawing” model. This model suggests that countries are likely to adopt EU rules and principles if they view them as effective solutions to domestic issues, rather than due to the EU’s coercive or normative power. Non-member states adopt EU rules without needing incentives or persuasion from the EU. Unfortunately, even in this case, the authors have difficulties in explaining how, in practice, values and norms affect states’ behaviour. In fact, even Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier on several occasions underlined that constructivist models are inconsistent and marginal due to their weak explanatory power (Schimmelfennig, 2003; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). The literature review highlights how deep the hole in the EU enlargement landscape has been since the establishment of the Communities. Both EU politicians and scholars faced the enlargement policy basing their considerations only on a utilitarian view, mostly overlooking the topic of the European Union identity.

This view of looking at enlargement has been limiting, since to understand whether a country is eligible to be a member of a given community (of people or states), it is necessary to first establish an identity. After that moment it will be possible to determine interests and advocate for them, benefiting the whole community. The admission of partially-democratic states and the rise of populism with the consequent decline of people's political participation have jeopardized the definition of the EU identity leading to a deviation in the European integration process. Unfortunately, the debate around the EU identity is too broad to be part of this paper and it is a job of the EU institutions to be brave enough in defining who should be (and who should not be) part of our community. This paper will contrarily consider only the Rule of Law, one the pillars of the EU since the first discussions about the possibility of enlargement.

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper will be the "External Incentives Model" (EIM) elaborated by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier in 2019. The EIM operates as a negotiation framework where conditionality is the main tool for Europeanisation. The EU requires target states to adopt its norms and rules as conditions for receiving rewards, which can vary from financial funding to membership. Governments of candidate states can choose to accept or reject these conditions, based on whether the benefits of the reward outweigh the compliance costs, a decision heavily influenced by domestic politics. If the target government fails to meet the conditions, the EU withholds the reward; otherwise, the reward is granted (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2019). In this sense, the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) can be intended as a tool of conditionality since the implementation of its projects and their success are conditions necessary to reach a "reward" – in this case, the benefits produced by the IPA plans, which in turn are unavoidable to achieve the membership. Finally, following the logic enshrined in the EIM, this paper intends to analyse how much the action of the EU – specifically, the IPA – has promoted the adoption of these democratic values and, therefore, its identity in the WBCs. The research will focus on the area of the judiciary since, as it will be discussed in the following chapters, it is the one that requires the most urgent reforms. Due to the lack of data, this paper will only focus on the programming periods 2007-2013 and 2014-2020. Consequently, the research question of this paper is the following:

How has the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance influenced the adoption of reforms in the judiciary of Serbia in its path toward EU membership and EU identity?

The reason why Serbia has been chosen as the case study for this research is based on the peculiar history of the country, which has impacted its neighbor countries as well. The EU has historically maintained a favourable relationship with Serbia due to its influence over the region during the Yugoslavia period as well as the negotiation stage for the resolution of the Balkan wars.

Finally, addressing democracy and the Rule of Law (RoL) is not only useful for this paper, but also necessary considering the direction our continent has taken in the last few years. Several indicators ranging from the decrease in citizens participation in elections to worsening of the RoL show that most of the EU countries are

crossing a period of weakening democracy due to the rise of right-wing/extreme right populism (Anthony J., 2022; The Global State of Democracy, 2023). The intolerance of a significant portion of the population and the general dissatisfaction toward democratic governments in facing contemporary challenges has led to the ascent of a new authoritarian-conservative ideology, namely populism. This political approach is based on the criticisms of the political establishment and the erosion of political trust, accusing parties and democratic institutions of slowing down the decision-making process due to the lack of responsiveness and accountability. Consequently, fighting for the reinforcement of democracy and the RoL must be a pillar in the policy of the EU and, in turn, in its enlargement strategy. Creating a common identity based on these principles can be the beginning of a new approach that can reverse the path of democracy's evolution in the EU.

Analysis

Based on the literature reviewed and in line with the research question presented in the previous chapter, the hypothesis that will be tested is: *The Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance has significantly contributed to the strengthening of the Rule of Law in Serbia, and more specifically to the independence of the judiciary, thus facilitating the Country's progress toward EU membership.*

The analytical framework to test the hypothesis will be based on the EIM (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2019). In this model, different factors can determine the conditionality and its effectiveness by influencing the cost-benefit estimates, including:

- Rewards, conditionality will be effective if the reward is sizeable.
- Determinacy, if candidate states precisely know what actions they must take to get the reward, there is a higher chance for them to meet the conditions.
- Credibility, this term refers to the odds of not getting funds or support from the EU whether the candidate does not meet the conditionality or, in the opposite case, the chance that the EU holds its promise to pay the reward in case of success. Credibility is mainly affected by the benefits of EU countries provoked by the fulfilment of conditionality or the internal consensus about enlargement.
- Costs, referring to the domestic spending a candidate country must undertake for implementing EU rules (this last factor can not be studied due to the amount of knowledge and time required).

Reward

The size of the reward represents the benefits produced by the implementation of democratic reforms under the IPA in the matter of judicial independence. To obtain the "reward", the Balkan state must include in its IPA-related projects the priorities set by the EU before the start of the programming period. Considering the IPA, the priorities for Serbia are stated in the so-called "*Indicative Strategic Paper*" adopted by the European Commission. Related to the IPA II, the main document in this regard is the "*Indicative Strategy Paper for Serbia (2014–2020)*" adopted by the EC in 2014. The overall expectation was to improve the impartiality and efficiency of the judiciary, enhance the constitutional and legal framework, increase the technical and administrative capacities of the

judicial network, and reduce the backlog of cases (Indicative Strategy Paper for Serbia, 2014). In general, as also stated by the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe in several cases, Serbia should aim to better define the competencies of the High Judicial Council and improve its independence from the Ministry of Justice (Venice Commission, 2005), push for the separation of powers between the Ministry of Justice and the High Judicial Council (Venice Commission, 2011) and reduce the enormous number of pending cases in the Constitutional Court (Venice Commission, 2012).

Focusing on the size of the reward of IPA II projects, the EU allocated more than 1.5 billion EUR in the period 2014-2020. 265 million EUR of the budget was assigned to the area of the RoL and fundamental rights (Indicative Strategy Paper for Serbia, 2014). The budget was lowered to 246 million in 2018. Considering the major projects related to the IPA and judiciary independence, *“IPA 2016 – Support to the Supreme Court of Cassation”* had a budget of 1.5 million EUR, *“IPA 2016 – Support to the High Judicial Council”* had a budget of 2.8 million EUR, while had a budget of *“IPA 2017 – Support to the Prosecutorial System”* had a budget of 1.5 million EUR. The first one aimed at reducing the backlog of cases and assisting the Supreme Court of Cassation in the adoption of laws harmonised with the EU standards; the second intended to enhance the capacity of the High Judicial Council by improving its organisational structure and its financial management, budget planning, reporting and oversight of budgetary funds (Support to Justice Sector, 2016); while the last project targeted the adoption of a strategy regarding the human resources and financial management capacity and skills of the State Prosecutorial Council and the Republic Public Prosecutor’s Office, improving also the effectiveness of their cooperation (Support to Justice Sector, 2017). In other words, Serbia included all the priorities set by the Venice Commission and the European Commission since 2007.

Determinacy

“Target governments must know what exactly they need to do to meet the conditions and get the reward” (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2019: p. 817). This is how Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier (2019) intended the determinacy. Several conditions must be met to be part of the EU and to effectively achieve the benefits by the correct implementation of the IPA.

General instructions can be found in the regulations establishing IPA. The only reference to standards is in the Regulation (EU) No 236/2014 to institute uniform conditions for employing the IPA II (Article 7), stating that the management of the programme could be direct, indirect, or shared management. Regulation (EU) No 236/2014 has now been replaced by Regulation (EU) 2021/947 as stated in the regulation establishing IPA III (Article 9). Regulation 2021/947 specifies what legislative tools must be used for programs involving third parties. As happened with the IPA, the EC carries out its plans through annual or multi-annual Annual Plans (AP) based on programming documents (Article 23). The Regulation then specifies what kind of supporting measures can be adopted (Article 27). Unfortunately, there are still no provisions addressing how third parties should carry out the adopted plans. As emerged in the Annual Plans from the beginning of the IPA II, in 2014, there were no major reforms in the field of judicial independence. However, in Sector 1 (Democracy and Governance), under Action 4

(EU Integration Facility), the EU allocated a budget of more than 24 million EUR (almost 50% of the overall budget for Sector 1 of 2014) to sustain Serbia in the implementation of investments. The management of this Action was given to the EU delegation in Serbia. Nevertheless, no specific AP for Sector 1 was provided (European Commission, 2014). Conversely, since 2015, the EU has consistently adopted a detached Annual AP for the integration facility (in some years, even two APs, one for direct management and one for indirect management), allocating substantial resources to support the correct management of the EU funds. Lastly, the IPA is considered a program falling into the Budget support (2011), which is the cluster of projects dedicated to funding and technical assistance of the EU. Budget support assists third countries in improving the implementation of reforms to upgrade their performance and capacity building. The projects under the Budget Support must take into account the guidelines set by the EU in 2017 (European Commission, n.d.-a). The document mostly concerns the principles and the design of budget support policies.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the odds of not receiving support from the EU in case the candidate does not meet the conditionality and the chance that the EU holds its promise in case of success. Credibility is mainly affected by the benefits of EU countries provoked by the fulfilment of conditionality or the internal consensus about enlargement (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2019).

The political and financial relationships between the Balkan region, moreover with Serbia, and the EU started a long time ago and witnessed several ups and downs in the last thirty years. The changes in the opinions from the EU's side surrounding various sensitive issues such as the Balkan Wars and the independence of the Kosovo* region, jeopardise the credibility of the EU about the real commitment of the Community to solve the concerns of the Serbian population (Emini, 2025). Nonetheless, in the last decades, the EU has become the largest donor to Serbia, providing almost 3 billion EUR until 2020 only through the IPA (c. Furthermore, other funds have been provided through loans, grants, members' donations, and third-party contributions towards the cause. The financial support to Serbia has also been enriched with several statements by high-level figures in the EU landscape. In 2020, for example, Joseph Borrell, the former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stated that *"Europe is not complete without the Western Balkans"* after the adoption of the "A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans" and the candidate countries 2020 report. President of the EC, Ursula von der Leyen, confirmed the same feeling in a visit to the Balkans that occurred during the EU-Western Balkans Summit, asserting again the EU's support for WBCs (EEAS, 2021).

The EU, in recent years, has implemented several other financial tools to integrate the action of the IPA. The most prominent one is the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) between the European Union and Serbia, established in 2000, a policy measure aimed at stabilising the Balkan region, focusing mostly on improving regional cooperation between all the countries (European Union, 2019). This measure includes several principles and standards on which the WBCs must base their national initiatives. Another non-financial instrument to

improve the relations within WBCs and between WBCs and the EU is the Thessaloniki Summit, created in 2003, a permanent meeting that culminated with the Declaration of Thessaloniki, a commitment by the WBCs to pursue the Copenhagen Criteria and SAP principles. In the last two years, the EU also launched two large programmes: *“A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans”* and *“The New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans”* an innovative ongoing support measures launched in the last ten years in collaboration with third parties and international organisations highlighting the effort by the EU to advance the membership of WBCs. These tools have been deployed to integrate and expand the action under the IPA, providing WBCs with more resources and a stronger commitment in several sectors to push the political and economic convergence towards the EU standards.

Conclusion

Does the Perceived Reward Lead to Democratic Reforms?

The EC has always assessed the progress made by Serbia with reports and strategic papers regarding the general actions of the Balkan country in improving the condition of the RoL. Concerning the specific projects of the IPA, it is hard to find evaluative reports elaborated by the EU institutions. Most of them focused on the first programming period (HTSPE Limited, 2011; Ecorys, 2013) or the cross-border programs (AETS, 2017). The only relevant document is an external assessment report approved by the EC in 2017. Nevertheless, it must be highlighted that there is a lack of annual or bi-annual evaluation reports about the progress of the implementation of IPA projects. The first one is the “External Evaluation of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II) (2014 – mid-2017)” adopted in 2017 on behalf of the EC. Unfortunately, it is not possible to find any evaluative documents focusing solely on Serbia’s effectiveness or the IPA III development. One of the main questions the report answered is “To what extent do the overall objectives [...] and the design of the IPA II respond to (i) EU priorities and beneficiary needs identified at the time the instrument was adopted (2014)?” (Aigner et al., 2017: p. 7) finding the beneficiaries generally matched the set priorities with the implemented projects, in particular in the sector of the RoL ensuring the continuity between IPA I and IPA II. Moreover, the report stated that the Indicative Strategy Papers adopted by each country follow the general goals set by the enlargement strategy of the EU. The IPA II regulation allowed for assistance to be targeted and adjusted based on the specific circumstances of the beneficiaries. This flexibility means that WBCs can adapt their reform strategies to align with changing EU priorities, thereby enhancing their motivation to implement reforms that are viewed favourably by the EU. The ability to respond to crises and emergencies, as demonstrated in past reallocations of funds, further emphasised the importance of maintaining a robust judiciary to handle such situations effectively (Aigner et al., 2017).

Do Guidelines, Standards, and Feedback of the EU Improve the Management of the Funds?

In their External Evaluation of the IPA (2017), the authors assessed the efficiency of funds delivery. They noted that the EC had improved its administrative and financial management in the initial years of IPA II, demonstrating

an ability to meet current regulatory demands effectively. However, ongoing performance issues among some IPA II beneficiaries remained a concern. On a positive note, there has been an increase in the coherence of strategies, approaches, and procedures. Although sector budget support is growing, the expected gains in sector expenditure efficiency and public financial management systems have not yet materialised. Before 2016, the sector-based approach's integration initially decreased efficiency due to the time needed to adapt to the new programming method for pre-accession assistance. The EC has actively promoted budget support, gradually increasing its use for supporting sectoral reforms based on specific eligibility criteria. The authors expect budget support to increase further, potentially enhancing sector expenditure efficiency. However, inefficiencies in the implementation system have caused chronic delays in many policy areas, impacting the programming and implementation of IPA II actions (Aigner et al., 2017).

The sector approach has been effectively utilised in the IPA to promote reforms in various sectors. By targeting specific sectors, the IPA tries to advance structural modifications that help change these areas, reducing the gap with the EU standards. This method ensures that the assistance provided is more strategic and impactful, addressing the key areas necessary for the candidate countries to align with EU values and standards. According to the evaluation elaborated by the EC on the sector approach under IPA II, key institutional stakeholders have formally taken ownership of the Sector Approach, gaining a solid understanding of the concepts underlying the Sector Approach. However, there has been a notable discrepancy between the formal implementation of sector approach processes and the actual political support and resources allocated by key stakeholders, including the EU (European Commission, 2018b).

Do the Commitment of the Member States and the EU Affect the Path of Serbia?

Between the second half of the 2010s and the first half of the 2020s, the EU adopted new plans and funds to relaunch the mission of EU integration. Similarly, the EU has always held its promise to disburse financial resources under the IPA policy and never applied any sanctions due to the poor management of the funds and the related weak implementation. It is also noticeable that Serbia profoundly counts on these resources for the improvement of the judiciary and the general advancement of the country (The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2021; The President of the Republic of Serbia, 2020). At the national level, Serbia has different opinions as well. The principal leaders of Serbia recognised a lack of enthusiasm provoked by the long duration of the integration process and the poor quality of the outcome delivered. The boost of the EU integration process based on new funds and methodologies has not had(yet) the desired effect on the population, who are still not convinced that joining the EU will be the right path to endorse. Nevertheless, the fact that Serbia committed to a third programming period and other various EU supporting measures shows that the mixed credibility of the EU and its member states, linked with a poor implementation of the projects, is not significantly affecting Serbia's motivation to endorse EU integration.

It is Time for a New Staged Accession Process?

To conclude the paper, it could be useful to deliver a proposal for a new accession process that would partially solve the lack of the current EU approach towards enlargement, considering the outcome of the indicators analysis. In general, the most notable issues concerned the low resources and the lack of annual AP on the improvement of the judiciary. Considering the indicators and their characteristics (i.e the size of the reward, the precision of EU standards and guidelines, and the perceived commitment of the EU institutions in regards of Serbia candidacy) mentioned in previous chapters, it emerged that Serbia lately aimed at high-quality targets including closing Chapter 23 of the acquis in five years and transferring all the competences of the Ministry of Justice in the field of judiciary independence to the High Judicial Council in four years to get sizeable and tangible rewards (Support to Justice Sector, 2016; Support to Justice Sector, 2017). Nonetheless, the lack of a proper internal administrative capacity limited the progress achieved by the Balkan state. The EU, in this case, is attempting to relaunch the enlargement process through new programmes that specifically address administrative and facility weaknesses. Despite this, it is still too early to evaluate their advances. In 2023, the European Policy Centre and the Centre for European Policy Studies delivered a proposal to reform the pre-accession assistance tools, providing the establishment of a staged accession process. In the proposal, the authors highlighted the same recommendations presented in this paper. First, since 2007, the funding given to each candidate state has been allocated even if they did not achieve substantial progress in the addressed areas and membership conditions. The funds were allocated only considering the level of preparedness and relevance of the set objectives. With the Staged Accession Model, the authors propose a four-stage process, with each stage offering more benefits for candidate countries as a reward for increased levels of membership preparedness. Similarly, the IPA III funds should be assigned based on the performance and orientations of reforms. In recent years, the EU has given more space to other horizontal issues such as energy, gender equality, and digitalisation, which do not fully match the objective of membership preparation. To tackle these issues, the authors offered several options, which also include the ones included in the paper. In fact, they proposed to first increase the budget for the IPA and second to create a detached program in parallel with the IPA III to support the implementation of the Staged Accession Model. As mentioned in this chapter, the same logic could be used for the improvement of the actions linked to the judiciary. In the proposal, the authors also analysed in detail the adoption of a hybrid model where the implementation of the Staged Accession Model would occur under the Multiannual Financial Framework (Mihajlovic, 2023).

Firstly, a new staged accession process would increase the size of the reward (better reforms means higher chances of passing to the next stage, achieving higher rewards); Secondly, it will give the chance to the EU institutions to re-elaborate standards and guidelines for candidate countries, enhancing the determinacy of the EU actions; finally, it will relaunch the enlargement policy, improving the EU credibility in the WBCs.

In conclusion, strong conditionality is necessary to set high standards and to avoid post-accession complications, as has occurred with the Central and Eastern European Countries.

The WBCs display profound insufficiency in several areas, especially in the field of RoL, where the EC must tackle these issues from the beginning. Conditionality is currently the only weapon the EC has to ensure that candidate countries align with EU standards; nevertheless, until now, it has not delivered the intended objectives. In addition, the mechanisms created by the EC to monitor the progress made are insufficient. These metrics were inconsistent across countries, which created confusion amongst candidate states and decreased public support for EU integration. Moreover, the presence of a performance award and the absence of sanctions in case of failure weakened the credibility of the EU and raised concerns about the real target of the Community and its member states (European Court of Auditors, 2022). Given the aforementioned, in 2027, IPA will reach its fourth programming period, and a reformed (and staged) approach is necessary now more than ever. Strong conditionality will be the pillar of the enlargement policy, but only if the EU decides to seriously commit to establishing real leadership in the fundamental areas and becoming the legitimate arena to solve the issues faced by the citizens of the WBC, and, particularly those in Serbia.

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Unlocking Europe's Potential: Institutional Renewal and the New Wave of Enlargement

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Abstract

This policy brief explores the dual challenge the European Union (EU) faces: managing a shifting geopolitical landscape and preparing for a new era of enlargement while simultaneously addressing long-standing institutional shortcomings. In light of renewed momentum stemming from the 2023 Enlargement Package and recent Schengen integration developments, the brief argues that the EU must undertake comprehensive internal reforms to sustain credibility and functionality in an expanded Union. Key structural deficits, particularly the democratic deficit, limited parliamentary powers in foreign and fiscal policy, and decision-making inefficiencies, are examined alongside external pressures from global rivals and rising domestic populism. The analysis underscores the strategic importance of enlargement as a tool for stability, normative influence, and long-term demographic sustainability. Policy recommendations include merging the EU's executive leadership into a single directly elected president, expanding the legislative powers of the European Parliament, and introducing innovative pre-accession initiatives such as regional hubs and civic fellowships. Ultimately, the brief calls for a renewed commitment to democratic accountability, institutional cohesion, and geopolitical readiness to ensure the Union's resilience and relevance in the coming decades.

Keywords

EU Enlargement, Democratic Deficit, Institutional Reform, Political Fragmentation, Far-Right Influence, Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Council Decision-Making

Introduction

The European Union, as a sui generis union of sovereign states, has faced multiple crises the last decade that challenged even the most staunchly pro-European minds. It could be argued that the Union's existence, identity and sustainability were repeatedly threatened by the Covid-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, the large-scale irregular migration flows, the energy crisis along with the economic turmoil in the Eurozone that ended not so many years ago. Yet, the most pressing challenge facing the EU today is the rapidly changing geopolitical environment, coupled

with an urgent need for comprehensive institutional reform.

Amid global turbulence, the EU is increasingly required to confront both persistent structural deficiencies, such as its democratic deficit and inefficient decision-making mechanisms, as well as geopolitical upheavals in its neighborhood, such as the Russo-Ukrainian War and the conflict between Hamas and Israel. In this context, the Union's enlargement policy appears to be undergoing a significant paradigm shift. Since Croatia's accession on 1 July 2013, the EU has not admitted any new Member State until now. Nevertheless, the Commission's 2023 Enlargement Package has reinvigorated discussions on expansion, proposing accession negotiations with countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and offering candidate status to Georgia. Finally, the recent integration of Bulgaria and Romania into Schengen is a significant indicator of change. This brief explores these complex variables and offers strategic recommendations for a more adaptive and resilient European future in view of an upcoming enlargement.

Problem Description & Background

Historical Context and the Evolution of European Integration

From its origins as a post-war peace experiment, the European Union has undergone multiple transformations, including efforts for political, economic, and social integration among its Member States. Successive treaties, notably the Treaty of Lisbon, have attempted to streamline decision-making processes and enhance democratic legitimacy across the Union. When it came to the critical decision of choosing between enlargement and deepening, the European Union historically preferred enlargement. However, the enlargement of the EU was a long-forgotten debate due to the shocks that the EU has experienced in recent decades including the crisis in the Eurozone, the exit of Great Britain, the immigration crisis and the pandemic, which froze the accession procedures of the six countries of the Western Balkans (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo). As a result, the idea of deepening before enlargement gained significant traction (Koppa, 2022).

The internal architecture of the EU was not initially designed to accommodate the rapid expansion experienced during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Nonetheless, enlargement has been a key driver of both peace and stability, embedding democratic norms and fostering economic convergence (European Commission, n.d.). While many consider the European Union to have evolved into a Kantian Power with limited geopolitical influence, its decision to pursue further enlargement in Eastern Europe contradicts this narrative. Enlargement policy is one of the most powerful geopolitical tools available for the EU and represents a strategic investment for peace and security (European Parliament, 2022). As expected, though, this process has exposed structural vulnerabilities within institutions as they attempt to represent an increasingly diverse range of national interests, which will be discussed.

Geopolitical Upheavals and Their Impact on the EU

The geopolitical tensions the international system experiences from time to time and subsequently the Union's stance and response to them are an always present matter of discussion. But the war in Ukraine stands out as the par excellence major geopolitical upheaval which put the EU in a difficult position, where aid and crisis management need to be carefully balanced. On one hand, the existential threat posed by the Russian invasion demonstrably forged a stronger cohesion within the Union. This unity translated into rapid, concerted joint responses, such as the unprecedented provision of arms and financial assistance to Ukraine, the implementation of multiple packages of robust sanctions targeting Russia's financial and industrial sectors, and a coordinated strategy to mitigate the energy crisis, thereby highlighting the Union's capacity for collective action under duress (Concilium, 2025). On the other hand, an essential absence of internal unity has been revealed during the negotiations of the aforementioned issues, as well as the process of the Ukrainian accession. As European policies are being re-nationalized, there is diffused suspicion between member states and uncompromising priority to national interests to the point where the threats for veto use paralyse the procedures (Balfour & Lehne, 2024).

Conflicts in the region of Middle East, such the Israel– Hamas War and the skirmish Iran and Israel engage in further highlight the volatility of the international environment and the pressing need for a more robust, agile EU policy framework. Enlargement policy is becoming more strategic for the EU in light of the increasing competition with China, since it has significantly expanded its economic presence through loans and economic investments – including critical infrastructure projects and energy-related programmes -- in the Western Balkans in an effort to support the Belt and Road Initiative (Koppa & Tzifakis, 2024). Furthermore, the active presence of other authoritarian states in the region, namely Turkey and Saudi Arabia, risks undermining the EU's democratic agenda there as well as in the Western Balkans (Bianco, 2024; Toygür et al., 2022). Last but not least, these external pressures have spurred debates concerning the EU's reliance on traditional alliances, notably with the United States and NATO, calling for a reconsideration of the European reliance on these two in terms of international security policy (Retter et al., 2021).

Enlargement: Past Achievements and Future Prospects

Croatia's accession on 1 July 2013, as the 28th Member State of the European Union, marked the culmination of the Union's seventh enlargement wave, a historical process which had, up to that point, consistently served as both a vehicle for peace and a tool for the spread of democratic governance across the continent. Since then, the momentum of enlargement stalled due to successive internal and external shocks: the Eurozone crisis, the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the Union, growing migration pressures, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Thus, enlargement was pushed far down the EU's political agenda, leaving particularly the Western Balkan countries in a frozen state of accession (Koppa, 2022).

This stagnation, however, has begun to shift. The Commission's 2023 Enlargement Package, published on 8 November, constitutes not only the most significant legislative initiative in terms of enlargement in over a decade but also a clear geopolitical statement (European Commission, 2023). At the top political level, it proposes the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the granting of candidate status to Georgia. These recommendations were not merely symbolic gestures: they embody the European Union's strategic recalibration in light of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, as well as the shifting balance of global power. By extending a concrete path toward membership, the Union aims to stabilise its periphery, counter authoritarian influence, and anchor neighbouring countries more firmly to the European project. The strategic importance of enlargement for the EU also acquires a long-term perspective, given its negative demographic trends. In this light, adding new member states would help the EU to address its needs for human and other resources in the coming years and decades (Mentzelopoulou, 2025). Recent developments also include steps towards further integration within the Union, as seen in the inclusion of Bulgaria and Romania in the Schengen area from the start of 2025. Such progress not only reflects the evolving nature of EU borders but also underscores the need for institutional adaptation. The current configuration of the Union's bodies, ranging from parliamentary representation and decision-making processes to the allocation of budgetary resources, require comprehensive reform to manage the challenges of an expanded membership base (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2024).

Opposing voices and Challenges to Enlargement

Political fragmentation and rising far-right sentiments compound these issues and pose ongoing risks to the Rule of Law within Europe (Hancock et al., 2024; Dunai & Dubois, 2024).

Specifically, far-right parties that are in government in several states express great scepticism about enlarging the EU, that slows down or derails enlargement policy, particularly concerning Ukraine and the Western Balkans (Alexandris, 2025). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán – who cultivates far-right and anti-migrant themes in his Fidesz party – has flatly opposed Ukraine's membership talks, even threatening to veto them (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Slovakia's populist leader Robert Fico has made similar reservations. In effect, the far-right's framing can enable a single hostile government to derail enlargement: analysts warn that "under unanimity rules, a single hostile government can block progress" (Alexandris & Armakolas, 2025). Even though the positions of far-right parties vary on the issue of enlargement, their influence has clearly contributed to the accelerating nationalisation of EU policy-making, introducing complexities into Council decision-making that increasingly strain the Union's consensus-driven model (Blockmans, 2025). For instance, Hungary's Fidesz supports the accession of Western Balkan countries like Serbia, reflecting its regional strategic interests, but has consistently obstructed progress on Ukraine's candidacy, expressing concerns over minority rights and bilateral disputes to justify vetoes (Brzozowski, 2024). Brothers of Italy, under Giorgia Meloni, adopts a more pragmatic stance, supporting enlargement in principle, particularly when aligned with

Italian national and geopolitical priorities, and maintaining a pro-Ukraine and pro-NATO orientation (Esteso Pérez, 2024). In contrast, France's National Rally, led by Marine Le Pen, opposes further enlargement altogether, citing fears over migration, cultural dilution, and economic pressure (Birchard, 2025). These divergent agendas within the far-right spectrum demonstrate how national interests, rather than shared ideology, shape positions on enlargement, thereby complicating Council negotiations and fragmenting the Union's external policy coherence.

Far-right and populist parties across Europe increasingly frame EU enlargement as a threat, often invoking fears of mass migration, job loss, and loss of sovereignty or cultural identity (Armakolas & Alexandris, 2025). Analyses note that these groups have "stir[red] fears around new races to the bottom...around competition for scarce resources or migration" as a vote-winning strategy (Chiodi, 2025). For example, Germany's AfD and Austria's FPÖ explicitly warn that admitting new members (e.g. Western Balkan states or Ukraine) would undermine national sovereignty and social cohesion (Alexandris & Armakolas, 2025). Likewise, far-right discourse often links enlargement to immigration and social burden, e.g. predicting waves of "illegal migration" or higher crime (Joint Research Centre, 2025). The same study confirms that populist narratives portray migration as "out of control" – framing EU borders as "wide open" and inflating invasion fears – in order to mobilize support. Even mainstream politicians may echo these themes under pressure: the European Commission's Joint Research Centre warns that, facing populist competition, some moderate leaders have resorted to emphasizing the same immigration anxieties (e.g. stressing the need to "keep [migrants] away").

Despite these fear-driven narratives, surveys show a complex picture. Overall support for enlargement in the EU has recently risen – for instance, a 2022 Eurobarometer found 57% of EU citizens favor widening membership (a record high), with only 33% opposed (Bonomi & Rusconi, 2023). This surge is largely attributed to the post-Ukraine-war context. However, significant minorities remain anxious, often echoing far-right talking points. In a 2023 pan-EU survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations, only 37% of respondents supported Ukraine's EU membership, while 33% opposed it. Even larger shares expressed distrust of other candidates: 51% opposed Turkey joining, and over one-third opposed Kosovo, Serbia or Albania joining (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Almost half (45%) of those surveyed feared that admitting Ukraine would undermine EU security, and 39% feared it would harm the EU economy. These figures directly reflect the framing of enlargement as a security risk or an economic burden, themes strongly pushed by far-right voices. Polls confirm that concerns often align with far-right themes. Many citizens cite job competition and welfare pressure when discussing migration and enlargement (Joint Research Centre, 2025). In countries where the far right is strong, these fears are markedly higher. For instance, Austria's public is notably anxious, matching the FPÖ's anti-immigrant stance (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Overall, research suggests that far-right messaging has helped cement skeptical attitudes among a sizable minority, even as the majority narrative becomes more favorable (Bonomi & Rusconi, 2023).

Furthermore, political fragmentation in the EU – beyond just the rise of far-right parties – is widely seen as complicating enlargement. Political fragmentation means more divergent interests and thus more veto points. Recent years have seen a spike in such vetoes according to a study by Csaky & Grant (2025). Specifically, there have been 45 veto incidents from 2011 to 2025 in the Council, one-third in the last 1½ years alone. Hungary now leads with 19 vetoes, followed by Poland (7), some of which are high-profile vetoes (e.g. on Ukraine aid or sanctions). Bilateral disputes or special national interests are bottled up in Council votes.

Each enlargement meeting requires unanimity in the Council, so diverging national interests can easily stall progress. In recent summits, Hungary repeatedly vetoed opening negotiation “clusters” for Ukraine and Moldova, even holding a consultative referendum on Ukraine’s bid, effectively freezing their accession talks (Jozwiak, 2025). Greece has similarly threatened vetoes in a spat with Albania over ethnic-minority issues and Croatia has signaled it might block Serbia or Bosnia-Herzegovina accession steps over disputes about the Croat minority there (Bechev, 2024). In short, even without far-right governments, a fragmented Council with many small parties and diverse agendas creates gridlock: decisions delay while leaders “engage in political arm-twisting”.

Enlargement also raises sensitive issues in agriculture, judicial standards, and other major EU policies. For instance, integrating Ukraine would hugely increase CAP outlays (Cornago, 2025). Domestic politics (farmers’ protests, coalition bargaining) have already sparked EU debates on subsidies (Parmentier & Hsakou, 2024). A study by Cornago (2025) finds that without reform, enlargement would raise CAP spending 20–25% and make Ukraine the largest beneficiary. Likewise, ensuring candidate countries enact judicial reforms while EU members themselves debate rule-of-law pressures adds friction (Schwarzer, 2024). Enlargement means writing up a new multi-annual EU budget: central and large countries fear extra burdens. Smaller states fear any shift away from consensus could reduce their influence. These concerns often manifest in Council debates. Think tanks and some leaders (e.g. Germany’s informal “alliance for change”) have urged moving key enlargement decisions to qualified majority voting to prevent single-state vetoes (Bechev, 2024; Schwarzer, 2024). This fragmentation risks transforming enlargement into a transactional issue rather than a values-driven strategic project, thereby weakening the coherence of the Union’s external action. As domestic electoral considerations increasingly dictate national positions on enlargement, consensus within the Council becomes more fragile and conditional (Buras & Morina, 2023). This politicisation may not only delay the accession of candidate countries but also undermine the EU’s credibility as a normative power – meaning its ability to shape global affairs through the promotion of its values like democracy, human rights, rule of law –, particularly in its immediate neighbourhood where geopolitical competition is intensifying (Hollander, 2024).

The EU's Internal Reform Imperative

At the heart of the European Union's current difficulties lies a persistent democratic deficit. This essentially means, according to Stefanou (2020), that the EU system is not based on popular sovereignty, legislation does not follow fully democratic procedures, decisions and policies are often made far from citizens and without direct participation, and the EU institutions and their decisions are not accountable to European citizens. Key EU institutions, such as the European Commission, are not representative and are not accountable to the European people. European citizens perceive this system as something purely technocratic, strange and foreign to them, they fail to comprehend its functions and importance, hardly relating with the whole endeavour of integration, even though it affects directly and in many ways their everyday lives (Stefanou, 2022).

This happens partly due to the fact that the European Commission – perhaps the most influential body of the EU in terms of decision-making and law formation – is committed to a so-called “democracy without politics”. The term, used by Oleart & Theuns (2022), describes the Commission's choice to adopt technocratic and legalistic approaches to democracy, overlooking in that way the importance of political pluralism and citizen engagement. Balfour (2024) agrees that the EU's reliance on technocracy, while ensuring much needed policy continuity especially for long-term goals, has contributed to a perception of remoteness and lack of accountability among the populace.

Another crucial aspect of the democratic deficit is the absence of a common European identity. As a matter of fact, little coherence exists between national and EU identities, and EU citizens identify with their state of origin rather than the EU. This is particularly apparent in examining the declining voter turnout in European elections and growing support for eurosceptic parties (Katsanidou, 2025).

It is undeniable that there have been substantial efforts to bring both EU matters and the organisation itself closer to European citizens, to encourage them to actively engage with the civic society organisations and participate in the various initiatives, as well as to familiarise them with the structure and the policies of the Union. Notably, several changes introduced by successive treaty reforms (Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice Treaties) and particularly the Treaty of Lisbon have served to address the many concerns that the democratic deficit arises (EUR-Lex, 2022). In spite of that, Micolta Portocarrero (2014) deems that the Lisbon Treaty's reforms aimed at enhancing democratic legitimacy have been undermined by informal negotiation mechanisms within the legislative process. These mechanisms have not only rendered the treaty's additions insufficient in overcoming the democratic deficit but have also deepened democratic deterioration within the EU. Furthermore, the institutional weakness of the European Parliament compared to the Council's dominance hinders citizen engagement and accountability mechanisms. Last but not least, provisions such as the “passerelle” remain unused to this day, limiting in that way the true potential of this Treaty. The fact that only the European Commission can initiate legislative proposals, coupled with the disproportionate influence of certain member states in the Council, has contributed to perceptions of an undemocratic system. On top of that, the dependence on qualified majorities and the frequent use of vetoes within the Council has often led to prolonged deadlocks

in policy implementation, diminishing the overall efficacy of the Union's response in times of crisis (Duff, 2022). A characteristic example is the one involving Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán when it comes to decisions regarding sanctions against Russia, financial and military support for Ukraine (Foy, Tamma & Dunai, 2024). Another core institutional challenge the European Union faces is lack of direct accountability in the EU executive leadership and, in particular, in the process of selecting the President of the European Commission (Article 17.7 TEU). Under the current system, the President is nominated by the European Council and confirmed by the European Parliament, leaving EU citizens with no direct say in choosing the individual who leads the Union's executive arm. This indirect method of appointment fuels public disaffection with EU institutions, and reinforces the image of the Union as a technocratic structure distant from its citizens. Finally, the absence of a direct electoral link between the electorate and executive leadership also impedes the development of a cohesive European political identity (Poptcheva, 2014).

As the EU contemplates a new wave of enlargement, it becomes imperative to address these structural issues to ensure that all national interests are adequately represented and that the Union's governance mechanisms can keep pace with its growing complexity. Only by aligning its governance structures with the principles of popular sovereignty and transparency can the European Union secure both its democratic legitimacy and its future capacity to unite more than twenty-seven diverse nations around a shared European project. More importantly, it will render the European Union more attractive to the peoples and the governments of the candidate countries and especially in the Western Balkans, where Russian and Chinese influence is quite remarkable.

Policy Recommendations

Proposing one EU President

According to Duff (2022), splitting Europe's executive between two "presidents" has not delivered the clarity, unity or accountability that the Union needs. By creating a permanent but separate President of the European Council and a Commission President who also sits in that body, the Treaty of Lisbon introduced a bicephalous system that too often duplicates effort, sows confusion about who speaks for Europe, and allows one institution to blame the other when things turn out unexpectedly. In practice the General Affairs Council remains chaired by rotating national presidencies, foreign-policy unanimity still paralyzes action, and the ordinary legislative work of the Council is disrupted by shifting six-monthly agendas.

To remedy this, Duff (2022) proposes that the two presidencies be fused into one, so that a single, directly accountable EU President would chair both the European Council and the Commission College (and the General Affairs Council as its preparatory body). That reform would align executive responsibility with democratic oversight in the European Parliament, concentrate strategic direction in one office, and eliminate the duplication or division that arises when two figures claim to speak for Europe. A united presidency would also allow qualified-majority voting to become the norm, rather than unanimity or rotating-presidency consensus. It would bring coherence to foreign-policy decisions by removing tensions between Commission and Council, and would

refocus the Commission on genuine supranational leadership rather than acting as a national secretariat. Additionally, electing the President through a direct vote by European citizens, rather than appointment by member states, would enhance the democratic legitimacy of the EU's executive branch and strengthen the connection between EU institutions and the electorate.

Enhancing the powers of the European Parliament

Currently, the European Parliament shares legislative authority with the Council of the European Union under the ordinary legislative procedure (formerly "codecision"), as set out in Article 294 TFEU. Unfortunately, in key areas such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the Parliament's role is limited to being informed and consulted once the European Council has defined strategic objectives, pursuant to Article 36 TEU. Likewise, in most taxation matters, including the harmonisation of indirect taxation, legislative acts still require Council unanimity, with the Parliament only consulted under Article 113 TFEU (and similarly under Article 115 TFEU for VAT). In light of these constraints, the European Parliament remains unable to fully represent citizens' interests in some of the EU's most consequential policy areas leaving strategic decisions on foreign affairs and taxation largely in the hands of member-state governments (Rosas, 2020; Jaakkola, 2019).

Providing the European Parliament with the right of legislative initiative and allowing it to propose new laws directly would significantly contribute to the effort of addressing pressing issues in a more proactive way and effectively representing citizens' concerns as much as possible. Furthermore, amending the Treaties by using the Lisbon Treaty's passerelle clauses so that CFSP and all forms of indirect taxation (currently under Articles 36 TEU, 113 and 115 TFEU) fall under an enhanced version of the ordinary legislative procedure is very much needed for bringing democratic accountability. In that way, MEPs will answer directly to voters for decisions in every policy domain. The European Parliament would become a co-legislator with full powers to amend, approve, or reject measures in these policy areas – no longer merely consulted. Last but not least, a shared European political identity is reinforced, as citizens see their elected Parliament shaping even the most sensitive common policies.

Strengthening Pre-Accession and Border Integration Measures

Cross-Border Innovation Accelerator: Recent developments, such as the integration of Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen area in early 2025, highlight that EU enlargement remains an ongoing process with implications not only for candidate countries but also for current Member States. To ensure successful and sustainable expansion, the EU should increase investment in pre-accession programmes focused on capacity building, judicial reform, and economic development and especially EU-funded R&D collaborations (Di Clemente, Lengyel, Andersson, & Eriksson, 2022). To complement traditional pre-accession support, the EU should prioritize the Knowledge and Innovation Communities (KICs) which function as cross-border innovation accelerators that bring together start-ups, research institutions, and SMEs from candidate and neighbouring Member States to co-develop digital, green, and advanced-manufacturing solutions. In that way, seed funding,

regulatory sandboxes, and mentorship are provided, forging economic interdependence before formal accession and promoting a shared sense of European innovation culture (Regulation 294/2008).

“Re:Constitution” Fellowship: Embedding new members also requires strengthening societal bonds. The EU could further support the “re:constitution Fellowship”, a concrete pilot for civic mobility which enables young leaders from candidate countries to spend a year working in EU institutions, national parliaments, and civil-society organisations in different Member States. Fellows would build transnational networks, acquire practical governance skills, and return home as ambassadors of EU values, thereby seeding a pan-European identity at the grassroots (Forum Transregionale Studien e.V, 2019).

Regional Integration Hubs: To address the diversity of integration challenges, the EU can expand the mandate of its Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance which explicitly funds transnational and cross-border projects (European Commission, n.d.) and set up Regional Integration Hubs not only in the Western Balkans and Türkiye, but also in the Eastern Partnership countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), and the Mediterranean neighbourhood (Middle East and North Africa region). Each hub would coordinate infrastructure projects (transport, energy interconnectors), environmental resilience programmes, and cross-border labour mobility schemes. By clustering resources and decision making locally, these hubs would accelerate convergence and anchor candidate regions within the EU’s economic and regulatory space.

Conclusion

The EU has undoubtedly evolved during the decades to welcome a growing number of new Member States; nonetheless, the EU institutional setting and decision-making mechanisms will probably need to further adapt to include, in a near future, the current Candidate Countries, as its infrastructure was not originally crafted to accommodate such a large number of Member States. Major challenges concerning the EU parliamentary representativity, the role of the Commission and the Council, voting and decision-making processes, the budgetary allocation and its potential reform will have to face the increasingly diversified and opposite national interests. In addition, at an international level, the rise of far-right parties across the Union exacerbates tensions by injecting nationalist agendas into debates over enlargement, institutional reform, and budgetary solidarity. These parties often oppose further integration, seek to repatriate competences, and exploit veto powers to extract concessions, thereby threatening to turn consensus-driven processes into zero-sum bargaining. At the same time, external actors – most notably Russia and China – seek to capitalise on domestic fragmentation by cultivating political allies and undermining confidence in EU institutions.

If the Union does not make the strategically effective and correct moves, it risks remaining at best static, if not dissolved, due to the constant economic and geopolitical pressure. This could lead it to fall behind, to be absorbed in internal matters that merely reach the borders of a simple Economic and Customs Union without any

further political and cultural unification between the member states and, ultimately, limited geopolitical projection of power. The European Union has exceeded the expectations of its pioneers and visionaries, demonstrating entrepreneurial spirit when it comes to managing the climate crisis, the Economic and Monetary Union, and many more areas that affect the lives of European citizens. The EU is always evolving, adapting to new realities, and, as before, this extraordinary entity has the potential to thrive through the multiple difficulties it may encounter in the future.

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The Unseen Threats: EU Defence Policy and the “Terrorism Tax”

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Abstract

The “ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030” is set to reshape European defence policy, while also reviewing the EU structural budget reform. Presented on 19 March 2025 by the European Commission, the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 emphasises the need for an increase in European defence spending, primarily – but not exclusively – due to the war in Ukraine (European Commission, 2025). This policy brief aims to broaden the vision set by the White Paper by including emerging non-conventional threats such as cyberattacks, hybrid warfare, and terrorism and violent extremism (T/VE) plots. The brief firstly explores EU budget spending and resource allocation, as well as the latest conventional war and T/VE events that directly or indirectly affect European security. Secondly, it outlines current EU defence expenditure and presents the “ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030”. The policy brief then explores the need to address T/VE, and the “terrorism tax” (Spaaij & Zammit, 2024) in the context of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). The limits posed by a conventional war-only EU defence approach are also analysed. Finally, this policy brief formulates recommendations in line with the White Paper with the aim of integrating war and P/CVE defence methods and their implementation.

Keywords

Defence spending, resource allocation, deterrence, cyber warfare, emerging threats

Introduction

The EU budget funds a wide array of activities and projects: the protection of the EU’s external borders (European Union, n.d.) is among them. It consists of a long-term budget – also known as the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) – and a short-term annual budget. The MFF is agreed upon by the European Parliament and the European Council, based on a proposal made by the European Commission. For instance, the EU is currently planning and financing its initiatives through the 2021 – 2027 long-term budget, with an overall spending capacity

negotiated at roughly €2 trillion alongside the post-COVID NextGenEU fund, the temporary recovery instrument to support Europe's economic recovery after the pandemic (European Union, n.d.). In contrast to the MFF, the annual budget is jointly drafted, negotiated, and agreed upon by the European Parliament and Council. Nonetheless, it can be amended due to unexpected circumstances (as occurred in 2022, when the war in Ukraine broke out) or if new information is presented by the European Commission (European Union, n.d.).

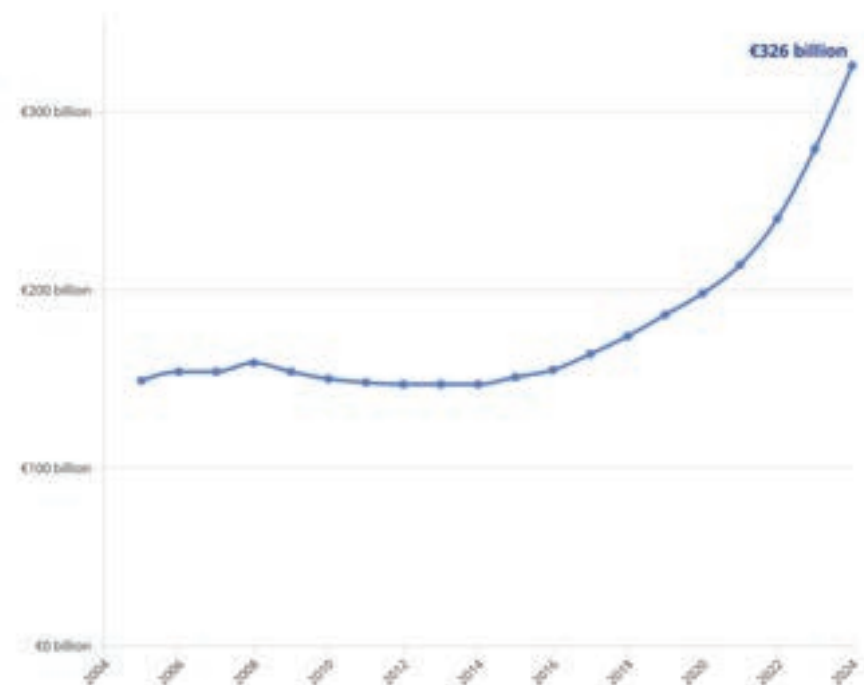
The EU budget is grounded in the following principle: "Expenditure must be matched by revenue" (European Union, n.d.). This matching principle ensures that any expenses should be recorded in the same accounting period as the generated revenues. The European Parliament assesses the implementation of the annual budget each year. Based on a recommendation from the European Council, the Parliament then grants the discharge for the Commission, that is it allows the Commission to allocate the budget proportionally across the following seven areas (European Union, n.d.):

- i. *Single market, innovation, and digital;*
- ii. *Cohesion, resilience, and values;*
- iii. *Natural resources and environment;*
- iv. *Migration and border management;*
- v. *Security and defence;*
- vi. *Neighbourhood and the world;*
- vii. *European Public Administration.*

At first glance, it may appear that EU defence spending falls exclusively under (v). While this may be true in terms of national defence investments measured as a share of GDP, it is important to also highlight the value of cross-sectoral investments that contribute to EU defence capabilities. Indeed, nowadays, ensuring an efficient, up-to-date, and deterrence-based defence may also imply sustainable investments in AI, new and emerging technologies (i). The same effort should be pursued in the formulation of EU-level and national resilience and value-building strategies to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE) (ii) and in effective border management (iv) to prevent and combat terrorist and violent extremist (T/VE) cells, human trafficking, drug trafficking, and arms smuggling within the EU. Finally, the development of EU-neighbouring countries bilateral and multilateral P/CVE relations (vi) must not be underestimated, especially in regards to the surge of successful, attempted, and foiled plots from self-radicalised individuals and externally directed terrorist cells radicalised by Central Asian and MENA T/VE groups (Testa, 2024). This translates into a growing awareness of the importance of security policy-making centred on EU-wide cooperation.

Current EU defence expenditure

Defence expenditure (2005-2024)



The European Council (2024) reported that EU defence expenditure rose by more than 30% in real terms between 2021 and 2024. Figure 1 (European Defence Agency, 2024) shows the rise in defence expenditure from EU member countries in the period from 2005 to 2024. In 2005, the then 25 EU member states (European Union, 2009) had invested €149 billion in defence expenditure. Nineteen years later, the 27 EU member states have more than doubled their defence spending, with €326 billion having been invested in 2024 (European Council, 2024). Estimates of the European Council (2024) suggest that another €100 billion may be invested in this area by 2027. In 2024, 30% of EU defence expenditure accounted for defence investments (€102 billion). Of these, over €90 billion were allocated to defence equipment procurement and over €10 billion were invested in research and development (European Council, 2024). Furthermore, another €16.4 billion were allocated to this area under the 2021 – 2027 MFF, specifically to boost defence and research under the European Defence Fund (€8 billion); to improve joint defence procurement (€300 million); and to enhance ammunition production (€500 million) (European Council, 2024).

Among the 27 EU Member States, 23 are NATO Allies (European Council, 2024). Officially established in 2002 (European Union, 2002), the European Union-NATO partnership focuses on operational cooperation, coordinated exercises, capacity-building, defence capabilities, defence industry and research, political dialogue, countering hybrid threats, and cyber security and defence (European Council, 2024).

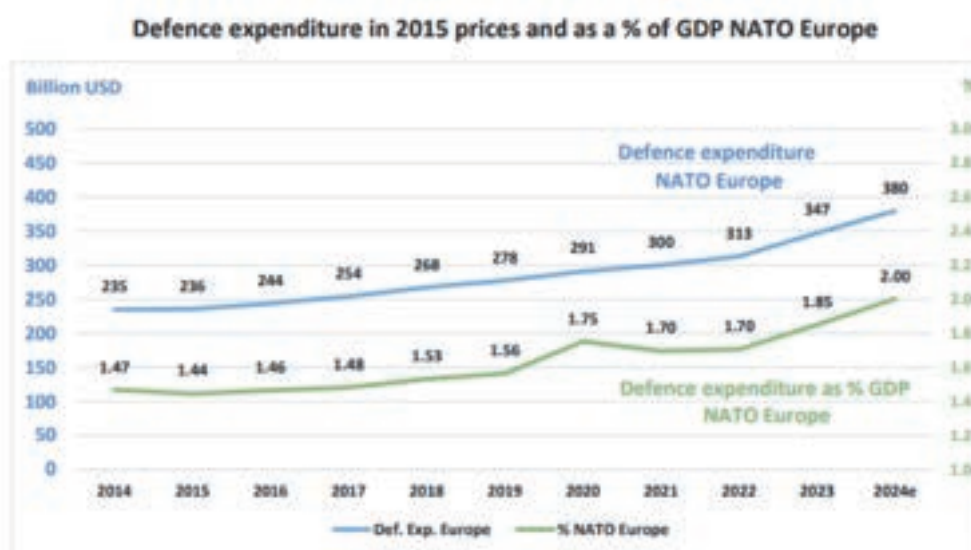


Figure 2: Defence expenditure in 2015 prices and as % of GDP NATO Europe © NATO

Figure 2 shows that NATO European members' defence expenditure constitutes roughly 2% of the combined GDP of EU NATO Allies (NATO, 2024). In 2025, EU NATO Allies' contributions to defence expenditure are expected to reach 2.04% of their combined GDP (European Council, 2024). According to Global Firepower¹ (2025), the following EU countries rank highest in military strength (conventional warfare assets): France (0.1878); Italy (0.2164); Germany (0.2601); Spain (0.3242); and Poland (0.3776). Conversely, these EU countries occupy the last five positions in the European Union Military Strength ranking as follows: Slovenia (2.1016); Ireland (2.1103); Latvia (2.1246); Estonia (2.2917); and Luxembourg (2.6415) (Global Firepower, 2025). In terms of military expenditure (% of GDP), the aforementioned countries ranked as follows (World Bank Group, 2023):

- Poland (3.8%);
- Estonia (2.9%);
- Latvia (2.3%);
- France (2.1%);
- Italy (1.6%);
- Germany (1.5%);
- Spain (1.5%);
- Slovenia (1.3%);
- Luxembourg (0.7%);
- Ireland (0.2%).

¹ The Global Firepower Index is Global Firepower's in-house, unique display of data concerning 145 military powers of today. The final ranking is calculated based upon 60+ individual indicators taking "each nation's potential war-making capability across land, sea, and air fought by conventional means" (Global Firepower, 2025). The closer a country's score is to zero, the higher is its position in the military strength ranking (conventional warfare assets) and vice versa.

This shows that an indiscriminate increase in military expenditure (% of GDP) – especially in terms of defence investments and defence equipment procurement – does not necessarily lead to a proportionate increase in military strength, at least in the short to medium terms. Rather, a correlation between geographical position and military expenditure (% of GDP) may be more easily highlighted: Eastern European and Baltic states, which are located nearby countries non-party to the EU bloc (e.g. Russia, Belarus, and Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), have invested a much higher portion of their GDP in defence expenditure. On the other hand, even though Western and Southern European countries have shifted their focus on demilitarising the region post-WWII (thus progressively spending smaller portions of their GDP for defence), they are still ranked as the strongest conventional military powers within the EU in most cases (Global Firepower, 2025).

The prospects of EU defence policy

In her 2024 – 2029 political guidelines (von der Leyen, 2024), Ursula von der Leyen presented before the European Parliament the priorities that she had defined for her second mandate as President of the European Commission, together with the new College of Commissioners (European Commission, 2024). Von der Leyen (2024) envisioned that the European Commission should set to focus on the following areas for the next five years:

- i. *Promoting a new plan for Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness;*
- ii. *Advancing a clean industrial deal;*
- iii. *Shaping a new era for European Defence and Security;*
- iv. *Supporting people, strengthening EU society and the EU social model;*
- v. *Sustaining the EU quality of life in food security, water, and nature;*
- vi. *Protecting EU democracy and upholding EU values;*
- vii. *Fostering a global Europe which leverages its power and partnerships;*
- viii. *Nurturing the ability to deliver together and prepare the Union for the future.*

This paper will briefly explore priorities (iii), (vi), (vii), and (viii).

In priority (iii), von der Leyen stressed the importance of investments in Ukraine for European security; the creation of a strong and cooperative European Defence Union; the presentation of the White Paper on the Future of European Defence in the first 100 days of her new mandate; a more consolidated EU-NATO partnership; the reinforcement of the European Defence Industry Programme; the creation of a true Single Market for Defence; the promotion of flagship European Defence Union projects; the launch of a European Air Shield and a shared action plan for cyber defence; and the mitigation of defence projects-related risks (von der Leyen, 2024). Furthermore, the EU should strengthen both its physical and cyber defence capabilities and develop a common approach to chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) threats. The Union should also work on integrated deterrence and a strategic approach to fight organised crime more efficiently, both offline and online, develop a new European Internal Security Strategy, and more than double EUROPOL's staff

and enhance operational capacity. It is just as necessary to put forward a new European plan against drug trafficking, set up a new Counter-Terrorism Agenda focusing on P/CVE in new and emerging approaches, fund and develop counter-radicalisation strategies, and implement a new European Critical Communication System for police, armed forces, and security staff operators (von der Leyen, 2024). Finally, stronger common borders and a review of the policies concerning migration and asylum should also be undertaken (von der Leyen, 2024)

Priorities (vi), (vii), and (viii) necessarily broaden the subject of defence and security to encompass other civil, social, economic, and relational aspects of the utmost importance to the European Union. Nevertheless, in line with priority (iii), priority (vi) also stresses the development of a new European Democracy Shield, a collaborative EU strategy proposed by von der Leyen to counter misinformation, disinformation, foreign information manipulation, and online interference. It is just as crucial to increase situational awareness and address the emerging threats posed by hyper-realistic deepfakes and AI-produced content (von der Leyen, 2024). The focus will shift onto preserving and promoting free speech and strengthening the rule of law (von der Leyen, 2024). Besides, priority (vii) highlights the necessary support that the EU must grant to Ukraine; the consolidation of existing partnerships with the G7, the United Kingdom, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbeans in terms of security; the promotion of EU enlargement as a geopolitical imperative; and the EU diplomatic involvement “in a just and comprehensive resolution to the 7 October war in Gaza” (von der Leyen, 2024). Lastly, priority (viii) reiterates the need for a more focused, simpler, more impactful, rule-based long-term budget, fit for EU ambitions to allow for flexibility, responsiveness, and strategic focus in the seven key spending areas of the Union (von der Leyen, 2024)..



Figure 3: Military expenditure (% GDP) © World Bank Group

Nonetheless, as duly noted by the European Commission (2025), President von der Leyen stated that the last several years have made the EU vulnerable to “chronic under-investment [in defence and security] and a lack of efficient [military] spending”. Figure 3 illustrates the military expenditure (% of GDP) of the European Union over the period from 1960 to 2023. Back in the 1960s, the EU was known as the European Economic Community (EEC) and comprised a total of six countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands (European Commission, n.d.). In 1962-1963, the EEC countries had invested 4% of their combined GDP in defence – more than double the value of the EU military expenditure in 2023 (World Bank Group, 2023). This may be due to the six countries’ shared history in World War II in terms of Nazi occupation (Belgium, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands) and neutrality policy (Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands) adopted during the 1939-1945 war. Also, most of these countries were either governed by Nazi or fascist regimes (Germany and Italy) or had resistance movements actively opposing Nazi occupation (Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands). Furthermore, the geopolitical, military, and social tensions due to the Cold War initially triggered an increase in EEC military expenditure (World Bank Group, 2023).

As the US-URSS shifted their military focus from Europe to the newly contended Indo-Pacific and Middle Eastern fronts due to the rise in proxy wars in those areas, the EEC investments experienced a rapid decline in military expenditure (% of GDP) from 1963 to 1970. The following wars are worthy of mention due to their global resonance during those years: the Vietnam War (1955-1975), the Indo-Pakistani War (1965), the North Yemen Civil War (1962-970), the Six-Day War (1967), and the War of Attrition between Israel and Egypt (1967-1970). As they took place on different fronts than the European continent, European countries progressively shifted from a wartime economy to a new approach: the chase for a booming commercial economy, the pursuit of scientific and technological innovation, and the space race exemplify this newfound Western attitude. In Europe, the Cold War was not fought directly with weapons any longer: it had become a whole new mindset to embrace instead. In 1991, the Cold War came to an end with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. By that time, the then 12 countries of the European Community (EC) were investing only 1.9% of their combined GDP in defence (World Bank Group, 2023) – less than half the amount that the six EEC countries had been investing between 1962 and 1963.

The reduction in military expenditure continued until the early 2000s, when the Bush administration launched what was termed the ‘War on Terror’ (The White House, n.d.), following Al-Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center Twin Towers in 2001. That was also the only time that NATO countries invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, pledging collective defence (NATO, 2023), a time when EU countries had been highly neglecting their defence spending. The subsequent increase in defence spending remained a struggle and was short-lived: in the 2010s, EU military expenditure (% of GDP) had hit its all-time low at 1.3% (2014 – 2017). The conflict in Donbass (Ukraine) had broken out in 2014. Nevertheless, EU countries only began increasing their military spending in 2019, when the Donbass conflict had already escalated into a full war between the Ukrainian national armed forces and the Russian-backed separatists fighting in the region. The 2019 ceasefire – reached

through the mediation of France and Germany in Paris – was neither properly implemented, nor fully respected. This led to Russia's full-scale invasion into Ukraine in 2022 – and subsequently, to a new boost in military expenditure (% of GDP) from the now 27 EU countries (Center for Preventive Action, 2025).

Moreover, the EU is struggling to maintain its historic centrality and to keep up with the new multipolar world order established by ultra-competitive powers such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (the so-called BRICS countries) in the domains of defence, cyber, and economic growth. The T/VE threats stemming from other regions such as the Middle East, North Africa, the Sahel, and Central Asia further complicate the European physical and digital P/CVE landscape. In her 2024-2029 political guidelines, President von der Leyen noted that between 1999 and 2021, EU defence spending increased by only 20% (von der Leyen, 2024). Over the same period, Russia and China increased defence spending by nearly 300% and 600%, respectively (von der Leyen, 2024). Effective and strategically coordinated defence investments cannot be fully achieved within the next five years, but must be carefully planned and developed in the span of at least the next couple of decades.

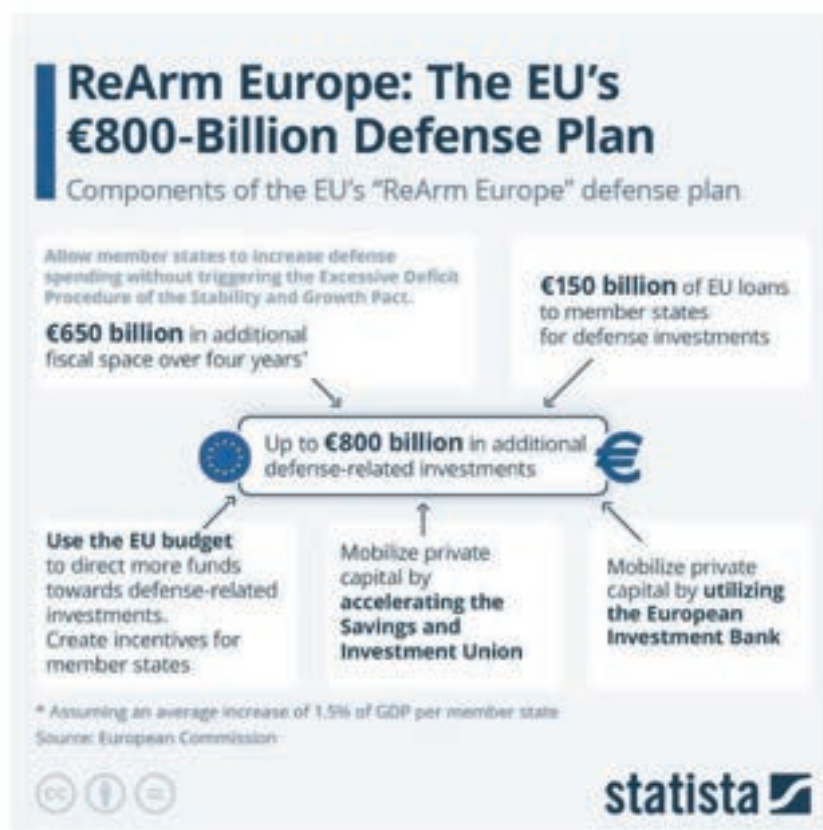


Figure 4: ReArm Europe: The EU's €800-Billion Defence Plan © Statista

For the purposes of this policy brief, it is important to differentiate between the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 and the “ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030” plan. Indeed, the White Paper should be understood as a framework for defining defence strategies and identifying security investment needs (European Commission, 2025). On the other hand, “ReArm Europe” serves as a plan to strengthen defence capabilities across all EU Member States (European Commission, 2025). Figure 4 depicts the main objectives of “ReArm Europe”: firstly, in the next four years under von der Leyen’s presidency, the European Commission aims to achieve an average increase in defence investments equal to 1.5% of GDP per EU Member State (European Commission, 2025). Additionally, the plan calls for the allocation of €800 billion to boost defence and security investments (European Commission, 2025; Richter, 2025). EU Member States will have the capacity to invest around €650 billion over the next four years, as enabled by a newly implemented fiscal flexibility policy (Richter, 2025). In addition, up to €150 billion will be granted in EU loans to EU countries for defence-related investments (Richter, 2025). “ReArm Europe” also aims to encourage and create incentives for EU members to invest more EU budget funds in security (Richter, 2025). Finally, the plan should contribute to mobilising private capital through an accelerated implementation of the Savings and Investment Union (Richter, 2025), with the support of the European Investment Bank (Richter, 2025).

EU defence policy and the “terrorism tax”

Despite recurring historically (Spaaij, 2016), terrorism – and subsequently, violent extremism (T/VE) – episodes are not classified as traditional security threats (Attinà, 2016). Instead, T/VE plots are identified as transnational security threats (Maras, 2014), as they can impact multiple countries simultaneously. To date, there remains no universally accepted definition of terrorism (Saul, 2021). What has been broadly acknowledged is that contemporary T/VE attacks commonly exploit violence against innocent victims to coerce third parties such as governments to alter an undertaken policy, position, or action (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime). In the context of P/CVE policy-making – whether at the national, EU, or transnational level –, a first basic distinction must be made between soft targets and hard targets. Soft targets can be defined as “relatively unprotected physical places, easily accessible to the public, such as stadiums, railways, shopping malls, or open-air areas” (United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2022). In contrast, hard targets “are subject to constant and strict security measures” (United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2022): this is the case for embassies, police stations, and military bases, which are usually staffed with armed personnel and high-surveillance systems or patrols. However, it is more challenging to ensure the same exceptional level of security in crowded – and thus, less protected – places.

The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (2022), also known as UNOCT, indicated that both local factors and the ideological profile of T/VE groups are decisive in determining where a T/VE attack may be carried out. The simplest logistical choice is often to attack a soft target. UNOCT (2022) listed the main reasons for a T/VE plot as follows:

- i. *“Personal grievance against specific [religious, tourist, and allegedly amoral] groups;*
- ii. *Perceived degrees of vulnerability [of a place];*
- iii. *Presence of large crowds in addition to weak or no security measures;*
- iv. *Proximity to the group’s area of operation or access;*
- v. *Possibility of achieving quick media coverage [to compensate] for weakness [that is, lack of resources or planning capabilities];*
- vi. *[Intention to test] a new strategy, tactic or weapon.”*

Finally, soft targets may grant “more room for improvisation” (United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2022). In case the enacted T/VE plot does not go according to the original plan. A new EU defence plan targeting T/VE threats should also take these factors into account and shift onto more flexible partnerships involving police, armed forces, civil society, and academia.

For instance, in the appalling 2012 and 2014 issues of the Al-Qaeda magazine, Inspire, Al-Qaeda repeatedly deemed sporting events to be “very easy targets” (Spaaij & Zammit, 2024). The presence of dense crowds and the attendance of high-profile figures was especially highlighted, as well as the motives investigated by UNOCT (2022) above. This has led to a general “September 12 thinking” (Crelinsten, 2009) from governments – a reactive, short-term post-9/11 approach – when it comes to P/CVE during heavily crowded or highly renowned public events, first and foremost during sporting events. For instance, according to Ramón Spaaij (2016), great efforts are made to ensure top-tier security at the Olympic Games, which have historically been targeted by Jihadist groups: the Munich massacre (1972) against Israeli athletes, carried out by affiliates of the Palestinian militant group Black September, constitutes one of the most nefarious examples. Nowadays, the Olympics can boast of “one of the world’s largest security operations outside of war” (Spaaij, 2016; Boyle, 2012).

In this sense, the latest Paris 2024 Summer Olympics have been presented as an outstanding case study for government and law enforcement officials, as well as for private technology companies to draw upon to develop effective P/CVE strategies before, during, and after large-scale events (Testa, 2024). After the ISKP-led Crocus City Hall attack nearby Moscow (Testa, 2024), Paris 2024 security officials had to broaden their monitoring operations to Central Asian countries such as Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan. They had already previously focused on globally consolidated T/VE non-state actors stemming from the MENA region,

²The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Khorasan Province, also known as ISKP or as ISIS-K, is an armed branch of the Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist group. ISKP aims to eradicate those versions of Islam deemed impure by the group (such as Shia Islam in Iran and the Pashtun tribal interpretation of Islam in Afghanistan under the current Taliban rule). Instead, it aims to impose its own Sunni interpretation of shari’ah law on the Central Asian region of Khorasan, historically comprising the countries of Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Russia, Belarus, and North Korea (Testa, 2024). Most of these countries pose either a historical or an emerging threat to the EU bloc due to current conflict involvement (i.e. the war in Ukraine), ideological conflict with T/VE groups (i.e. ISIS and Al-Qaeda), foreign misinformation and disinformation interference to undermine European democratic values and the rule of law (state-backed and private actors from Russia, Belarus, and North Korea). The 3.5 billion cyberattacks and data stealing operations expected at the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics (Testa, 2024; International Data Corporation, 2024) exemplified the current hybrid threats-oriented landscape to its fullest extent.

The limitations of an EU conventional war-only defence policy



Figure 5: Terrorist attacks and arrests per Member State in 2023 © EUROPOL

Figure 5 shows the number of T/VE attacks reported by EUROPOL member states for the purposes of the “TE-SAT: European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2024” (EUROPOL, 2024) in terms of successful T/VE plots (yellow) and accomplished arrests (blue). The five most targeted EUROPOL member states are ranked as follows in terms of successful attacks and plots culminated in preventive arrests instead: France (80 attacks and 78 arrests); Spain (3 attacks and 84 arrests); Belgium (2 attacks and 75 arrests); Italy (30 attacks and 34 arrests); and Germany (3 attacks and 51 arrests). Individuals were mainly arrested due to (i) participation in the preparation of a terrorist attack; (ii) terrorist financing; and (iii) public T/VE abetment, content dissemination, and training (EUROPOL, 2024). Contrary to past trends, most T/VE plots and funding are no longer exclusively organized or led by Islamist cells abroad, particularly those from Syrian and Iraqi camps (Testa, 2024)."

Nowadays, terrorist attacks are more frequently carried out by self-radicalised individuals and externally directed terrorist cells equipped with cold weapons such as knives (Testa, 2024). T/VE groups such as ISKP now heavily operate via cyber coaching (Testa, 2024), end-to-end encrypted (E2EE) apps (Testa, 2024), generative AI-powered campaigns to disseminate disinformation and hate speech online (EUROPOL, 2024), and cryptocurrencies for terrorism financing operations (EUROPOL, 2024). Most importantly, France, Spain, Italy, and Germany – four out of the five countries most targeted by T/VE actors – had also ranked amidst the five countries fielding the strongest military capabilities in terms of conventional warfare assets (Global Firepower, 2025).

The current T/VE shifts in AI-powered and new technology exploitation confirms an emerging trend for the future of war: battlefield conflicts will progressively engage the Global North less directly and more often than not, they will involve state-backed proxies on the ground or in the cyberspace instead. In turn, both states and proxies will rely more heavily on AI surveillance and detection systems, databases, arms, biometric data exploitation, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) such as drones (Testa, 2024). Moreover, developed powers will increasingly focus on hybrid and economic warfare methods to promote their state interests and narratives and to undermine adversarial growth and values – especially through increased, more advanced cyber threats. Examples of cutting-edge cyberattacks include denial of service, social engineering, ransomware, data exfiltration, and exploitation of application and service vulnerabilities (Testa, 2024).

If the “ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030” and the White Paper were enacted to push for an EU conventional war-only defence policy, this would imply an exclusive or predominant focus on external border patrol and management of external threats. Nonetheless, as extensively shown by this policy brief, possessing the most advanced conventional warfare assets may not be enough any longer in a world where it is easier to communicate across – and even, breach – borders through digital devices. While a conventional war-only strategy may be useful to boost EU deterrence capabilities in the short-term, this will neither enable EU countries to develop tailored defence policies, nor to find the root causes behind the latest modern-day hybrid warfare and T/VE trends. In the long-term, a conventional war-only approach to defence policy may even lead to heightened global mistrust, tensions and instability – and subsequently, to a diminished overall sense of security. In turn, this may end up significantly hindering efforts to reduce grievances and to establish a dialogue aimed at solving interstate disputes in the new multipolar global order.

Policy recommendations

This policy brief outlines three policy recommendations in line with the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030. Their purpose is to broaden current conventional defence, P/CVE, resilience-building and value promotion. Conventional defence should still be pursued, but **(i) EU member countries should tailor the White Paper and the “ReArm Europe” plan to leverage their unique geopolitical characteristics**. The final goal would be the creation of a pan-European defensive coalition to foster not only external border but also internal border cooperation, where the geopolitical advantages of each state are taken into account and used at their fullest potential to maximise deterrence. For instance, traditional naval powers such as Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain should boost their navy and maritime capabilities: this should also be pursued in consideration of their strategic position on the Mediterranean Sea. Investments should focus on research aimed at bolstering projects such as the European Maritime Force (EUROMARFOR, or EMF), which currently involves France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. Continental powers should boost their land and air force, especially in the case of countries lying closer to the Russian border such as the three Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – and Slavic countries such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

Likewise, new and emerging threats must not be undervalued. These are primarily exacerbated by the interconnectedness of our globalised world, the almost total digitalisation of information and infrastructure, and the instantaneous exchange of data. Research has extensively shown that repeated interaction with similar content online may lead to the creation of “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers” (Testa, 2024) – and these may, in turn, constitute the underlying cause of homegrown and remote-led radicalisation. As AI-powered software and tools are increasingly exploited by T/VE actors, **(ii) EU countries should monitor internal borders as closely as external borders**. While the Schengen Agreement has allowed for the establishment of the Schengen area as “the world’s largest area of freedom, security and justice without internal frontiers” (European Commission, 2025), it has not led to a shared European answer to T/VE plots. It may be useful to learn from successful case studies such as the Paris 2024 security landscape: developing a European version of the French “Plan Vigipirate” to monitor, counter, and foil T/VE occurrences may represent one such example. This may be achieved in partnership with EUROPOL, as well as through the engagement of private security and technology agencies spread across the national territory all over the EU.

Finally, **(iii) EU countries should establish effective resilience and value-building strategies to tackle radicalisation well before a T/VE attack is carried out**. Establishing more engaging vocational pathways may provide an excellent starting point. For instance, the success of Paris 2024 also heavily depended on the so-called *juges d’instruction* or investing magistrates – professional figures unique to the French judicial system, acting as a cross between a prosecutor and an actual judge (Shapiro & Suzan, 2003). Another example is the French *Prévenir pour Protéger* plan (Interministerial Committee for the Prevention of Crime and Radicalisation, 2018), through which the French general public is educated to recognise and tackle radicalisation. In the long run, citizens’ awareness of T/VE at the EU level may help reduce the barrier between soft and hard targets, thus informally establishing “hybrid” targets through faster, community-led P/CVE

solutions.

Conclusion

This policy brief presented a comprehensive, cross-disciplinary approach to the topic of EU budget reforms and defence policy. The brief explored the rearmament, capacity-building, research, cooperation, and financing possibilities offered by the latest White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 and the “ReArm Europe Plan/Readiness 2030”. This was achieved through the compilation of historical and economic perspectives, as well as the current political standards set by the second mandate of President von der Leyen. The limitations of “ReArm Europe” were also amply discussed, especially in terms of the need to address the challenges posed by AI and emerging technologies to current P/CVE strategies. Finally, this policy brief outlined three policy recommendations to enhance the framework established by the White Paper in today’s most pressing security contexts: conventional warfare innovation, P/CVE standardisation, and civil society resilience and value-building.

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Sisyphus Climbing Tartarus: EU Anti-Corruption Policy in Moldova between 2014 and 2020

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Abstract

This article investigates the European Union's anti-corruption strategy in Moldova between 2014 and 2020, analysing the misalignment between EU conditionality design and Moldova's deeply embedded corruption culture. Using a theory-testing variant of process tracing, the study applies Roberts' Modern Firm Theory (MFT) and Christopher Hood's Cultural Theory of Risk to evaluate whether the EU's top-down, conditionality-based approach was strategically suited to Moldova's political environment. The findings point that, in the period analyzed, hierarchical conditionality failed to detach from the sources of policy instability and instead engage the inert elements in Moldovan civil society, thus reducing effectiveness. The EU oscillated between ex-ante and ex-post conditionality in a fruitless single-loop feedback mechanism with political elites like Sisyphus rolling a boulder to the top of Tartarus only for the boulder to roll back. By relying on conditionality and overlooking the collective action problem nature of corruption in Moldova, this approach reinforced the very dynamics it aimed to dismantle, resulting in minimal sustainable anti-corruption progress during the period analysed.

Keywords

Anti-Corruption Policy, Conditionality, Moldova, European Union, Eastern Partnership (EaP), Cultural Approaches to Risk

Introduction

In January 2010, one year after the turbulent Chisinau Uprising, the Republic of Moldova and the EU began negotiating the first draft of what would eventually mature into the 2014 Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). This marked a significant step in the EU's broader Eastern Partnership (EaP) strategy, which aimed to foster stability, democracy, and prosperity in its neighbourhood. Moldova was seen as a promising candidate within the EaP's new bilateral dimension, touted as a "bright disciple" of the EU due to its early enthusiasm for integration and reform (Ademmer & Delcour, 2016).

However, under that façade of success lay widespread entrenched corruption, a political system influenced by oligarchic networks, and inefficient, hollow anti-corruption agencies. These systemic weaknesses were exposed shortly after the 2014 Association Agreement, when in late 2015 the “Billion-dollar theft” scandal was made public. In late 2015, it emerged that approximately one-eighth of Moldova’s GDP (nearly \$1 billion in 2015 USD) had vanished from three major banks through a web of fraudulent loans and shell companies. The staggering heist, enabled by complicit officials and opaque institutions, not only devastated the country’s economy but also underscored the pervasiveness of elite capture and the impotence of Moldova’s anti-corruption mechanisms. The scandal prompted the EU to invest extensively on corruption-tackling in Moldova, initiating a period where reforms and assistance were tied almost exclusively with anti-corruption measures (Corman & Schumacher, 2022). However, contrary to expectations, during this same time very little progress was achieved in terms of combating corruption. The main argument of this research paper is that the failure to tackle corruption lies in incorrect strategic adaptation to Moldova’s political environment, nested in inflexible forms of conditionality.

Literature Review: Corruption and Anti-Corruption in Moldova

Moldova possesses four full-fledged anti-corruption institutions: The National Anti-Corruption Centre (NAC), the Anti-Corruption Prosecution Office (APO), the National Integrity Authority (NIA), and the Criminal Asset Recovery Agency, which functions as a subdivision under NAC but with an independent mandate (UNDP, 2016). These agencies were created during the stage of institutionalisation of New Public Management (NPM) in Moldova, from 1990 to mid-2000s, and bear distinct NPM-style characteristics: they have specific goals, limited mandates, and, theoretically, political accountability (Popsoi, 2017). However, these institutions have proven largely hollow. Their direct importation from international “best practices” without ensured functioning capabilities in Moldova’s context quickly led to sub-optimal results, rendering them a textbook example of “isomorphic mimicry” (Andrews et al., 2009). This is common in many post-soviet regimes, where grandiose anti-corruption legislation is often proposed to create an illusion of democratisation and progress (Kotkin & Sajo, 2002).

Moreover, as in other post-soviet countries, corruption in Moldova is not solely a principal-agent problem (i.e. “clean” citizens ruled by “corrupt” officials), but rather a more complex collective action problem. Citizens simultaneously denounce corruption but are conscious perpetrators of corruptive acts (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013) – what Miller (2006) coined “corruptible”. Such behaviour is due to the anticipation that corruption acts like bribes are necessary “greases” to receive public services (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2006; Karklins, 2005). Moreover, among street-level officials, there exists a general appreciation of corruption as a justifiable means to a moral end, while rejecting an opportunity to gain from corruption is “socially ridiculed” (Roman, 2014). This erodes trust in institutions and fuels the belief that individual resistance is largely insignificant and meaningless (Marquette & Peiffer, 2015; Zapata, 2018).

Moldovan society is thus saturated with a sense of fatalism, ticking the boxes of a set of self-enforcing characteristics: public cynicism about the motives and honesty of public officials, the non-existence of sustainable

checks on bureaucracy, lack of incentives for functionaries, and ultimately a lack of trust and collective loyalty amongst society (Hood, 2000). In Moldovan society, the prominent coping mechanism for unpredictability and instability is personal association networks that minimise randomness. Corruption is, under this light, seen as an additional benefit that comes with holding office (Roman, 2014). In this environment, the EU was called to fight corruption and promote the rule of law.

The EU's strategy to tackle corruption relied largely on a top-down approach that leveraged conditionality to achieve harmonisation with EU standards. Conditionality is a policy mechanism where benefits, like financial aid or membership opportunities, are offered in exchange for specific reforms or actions (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). It operates by setting requirements that recipient states must meet to receive the promised benefits (Grabbe, 2006). Typically targeting governance, institutional reforms, or policy alignment, conditionality is enforced through cooperation with ruling authorities who control state mechanisms (Vachudova, 2005). The approach aims to drive compliance, fostering structured top-down reform (Houghton, 2007). In Moldova, conditionality was channelled primarily through Macro-Financial Assistance (MFA) and legal assistance for reforming the judiciary and anti-corruption legislation (European Commission, 2022). Moreover, conditionality as a tool is further broken down in a temporal axis (ex-ante and ex-post conditionality) and in its form (positive or negative), corresponding to varying degrees of rigidity. Ex-ante conditionality refers to setting desired outcomes as preconditions for the disbursement of funding – it can be positive (reinforcement by reward), or negative (reinforcement by punishment) (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Correspondingly, ex-post conditionality refers to the practice of expecting outcomes after the dissemination of funding or assistance – it can follow a “better results – better rewards” logic (positive) or take the form of a reduction or suspension of benefits until compliance is achieved (negative). Positive ex-post conditionality does not include democratic governance as a precondition (Fierro, 2003), and as such is often present during the initial stages of association and is reinforced bona fide. In theory, this variation in conditionality allows the actor employing it to incentivise reform by rewarding good performance and trust (with laxer forms) or enforcing compliance (with more rigid forms). In practice, however, this relationship is more complex due to confounding factors and reverse causality; variation can occur due to changes in performance but also performance of agents can be impacted by different conditionality frameworks.

Cultural Theory and Approaches to Risk differentiates between four different cultural approaches, which have implications on the governing structure, the motivation mechanisms, and the outcomes of policies: fatalist, egalitarian, individualist, and hierarchical (Hood, 1995). Fatalist cultures perceive life as unpredictable and beyond individual control, resulting in weak governance and limited motivation to engage with risk. Egalitarian cultures emphasize equality, shared responsibility, and participatory governance, often motivating action through moral commitment and favoring precautionary policies. Individualist cultures prioritize personal freedom and market-based solutions, with minimal governance and motivation driven by self-interest and competition, leading to risk-taking and innovation-focused policies. Hierarchical cultures rely on structured

and market-based solutions, with minimal governance and motivation driven by self-interest and competition, leading to risk-taking and innovation-focused policies. Hierarchical cultures rely on structured authority and rules, with governance grounded in expertise and formal procedures, motivating compliance and producing technocratic, risk-managed policy responses (Hood, 1995).

Based on the above, conditionality can be described as a hierarchical incentives-based mechanism, with several drawbacks. Firstly, the transactional nature of conditionality can lead to hollow reforms, as these might be aimed at securing EU funding rather than genuine systemic change. Secondly, even when shirking behaviour of the agents is not the primary objective, the lack of local buy-in can hinder sustaining anti-corruption efforts beyond the EU's immediate pressure. Thirdly, conditionality's focus on institutions and legal compliance often neglects the effect of networks and (corruption) cultures. This is especially relevant in the case of Moldova and other post-soviet societies, where corruption appears to be a collective action problem rather than a principal-agent problem (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015).

Roberts' (2004) Modern Firm Theory (MFT) constitutes an apt framework to analyse the dynamics of strategic adaptation in a changing environment. MFT makes a distinction between Strategy (a goal against which to benchmark success), Statement of Scope (what activities the firm will undertake), Organisation (the means and actors through which the strategy is implemented), and Environment (the contextual features that impact the strategy's effectiveness). In this context, Strategy represents the loosely defined reduction of corruption and promotion of rule of law. The Statement of Scope is the hierarchical mechanism of conditionality, the main tool utilised throughout the EaP. As Roberts (2004) highlights, "[the statement of scope] less obviously determines what opportunities the firm is not (sic.) going to use". The organisation refers to the model of hierarchical, top-down cooperation with the governing parties. Consequently, selecting conditionality also entrenches the role of domestic ruling parties as integral interlocutors and decision-makers of the organisation, whose non-willingness to actively participate may freeze progress. Which party is in rule, the corruption culture, and the oligarchic networks can thus be interpreted as the environment, to the extent that they represent variables that the EU cannot directly control, but to which its strategy remains, nevertheless, susceptible. Especially for the ruling parties, the susceptibility lies in the paradox that the ruling party is simultaneously part of the EU's broader organisation and a secondary strategy actor, potentially with their own diverging agenda. Conditionality thus represents a mechanism largely dependent on the bona fide participation of national governments – in rapidly evolving political environments where this trust cannot be created or maintained, there is only so much that can be achieved. The EU regardless retains the ability to make unilateral adjustments through feedback. A useful typology to understand feedback in such a context is Argyris' (1976) differentiation between "single-loop" and "double-loop feedback. "Single-Loop" feedback refers to the practice of incremental adjustments within an existing framework (Argyris, 1976). Argyris & Schon (1997) use Ashby's (1960) metaphor of a thermostat that turns heat on or off to maintain a set temperature to explain single-loop feedback– in this case ex-ante and ex-post conditionality. In contrast, double-loop feedback is a more self-introspecting process that encourages deeper

reflection into the underlying mental models and governing assumptions inside a system (Argyris, 1976). In practice, this would mean moving away from conditionality's hierarchical nature in favour of a strategy that mobilises different agents of society.

Methodology

While seemingly favourable conditions for reform were present, including strong external pressure and financial support, Moldova's Corruption Perception Index score remained lower than 2014 throughout 2020 (Transparency International, 2024). Few of the scandal's stolen funds were recovered, the taxpayers were burdened with the banks' bailout, the oligarchic networks faced few repercussions, and the institutions were further politicised (CiFAR, 2020; Osavoliuk, 2021). By all means, it appeared as the EU's involvement produced no substantive corruption reduction.

This study adopts a theory-testing variant of process tracing, leveraging theoretical frameworks such as Roberts' Modern Firm Theory (2004) and Hood's Cultural Theory of Risk (1995) to answer why the EU failed to procure the desired outcomes in Moldova. The research question is thus whether the EU's hierarchical anti-corruption strategy was strategically misaligned with Moldova's socio-political environment during the 2014–2020 period. The identifying assumption is that the observed outcome (limited or counterproductive anti-corruption reform in Moldova) is primarily shaped by the EU's choice of strategy (hierarchical conditionality with single-loop feedback), rather than by exogenous or unchangeable domestic factors alone.

The use of process tracing in conjunction with theoretical models allows the analysis to trace back from observed outcomes to the mechanisms that produced them. The analysis draws on a triangulated body of evidence, including official EU and Moldovan government documents and press releases; reports and evaluations from international organisations; academic literature and policy research; and finally, news media and think tank publications. Process tracing is used to explore causal mechanisms and aims to reconstruct and analyse the sequence of events and policy choices, thus making it relevant for studying the EU's anti-corruption policy in Moldova between 2014 and 2020 (Beach & Pedersen, 2013; George & Bennett, 2005). This method is particularly well-suited for policy and governance studies where outcomes cannot be attributed to singular, isolated variables but rather to a combination of institutional, societal, and strategic factors. Within the logic of process tracing, each piece of evidence is treated as a potentially causal relationship and judged in the context of necessity and sufficiency. This follows Collier's (2011) typology of "straw-in-the-wind, hoop, smoking gun, or doubly decisive tests", although in this context these are implicit. By applying these tests, the study evaluates the strength and necessity of links between EU strategies and governance outcomes in Moldova. The explicit counterfactual is the hypothetical evolution of corruption in Moldova in the absence of the current framework of conditionality, and further in the active presence of an EU anti-corruption strategy that is aligned with Moldova's political and cultural environment (i.e., if the EU had employed a double-loop, egalitarian approach instead of a single-loop, hierarchical one). This is important because the paper does not tackle the counterfactual scenario of a complete absence of an EU anti-corruption policy in Moldova.

Analysis: The Pitfalls of the EU's strategy in Moldova

Moldova's political landscape in 2014-2020 was a period characterized by frequent changes in government, shifting alliances, and the omnipresence of oligarchs. In just six years, Moldova saw four different governments. The EU reacted to this political instability through a "single-loop" feedback mechanism, persisting on implementing a hierarchical mechanism and adjusting it between ex-ante and ex-post conditionality (Corman & Schumacher, 2023).

A descriptive timeline of the evolution of EU-Moldova cooperation helps illustrate this Sisyphean vacillating. In 2014 after the EU-Moldova DCFTA the EU initially employed ex-post conditionality, labelling Moldova a "success story". When the "Billion-dollar theft" scandal was exposed in November 2015, and after severe pressure from opposition and civil society, the EU changed its approach to ex-ante conditionality. This lasted until the end of 2016, when pro-Russian Igor Dodon became President. Fearing the loss of leverage over Russia, the EU reverted to ex-post conditionality, citing hopes of increased sense of ownership and cooperation with the EU as a justification. When in 2017 that same government amended the electoral law and the Moldovan Court invalidated the mandate of the elected pro-EU Chisinau Mayor Andrei Nastase, the EU suspended financial aid – a form of ex ante negative conditionality (EU Delegation, 2017; Turp-Balazs, 2018). The rise and fall of reformist and anti-corruption Maia Sandu in June and November 2019 respectively saw another two switches, to ex-post and then to ex-ante conditionality.

The myth of Sisyphus rolling a boulder up on Tartarus only for the boulder to roll back down is a well-serving metaphor to conceptualise the ineffectiveness and futility of this strategy. The "back and forth" functions as a necessary condition for the hypothesis that the EU employed single-loop feedback but is not sufficient on its own to confirm it. MFT (2004) suggests that changes in the environment can be tackled by "shaping the relatively inert elements of the organization". These are the structures and cultural norms, which, while difficult to change, are fundamental to long-term success. In this context, they represent the civil society, street-level official, and lower level bureaucrats, for whom corruption was legitimised by the participation of others. Strategically, tackling the prisoner dilemma nature of corruption would be equivalent to building a strategy on these inert elements. Instead, the EU reacted to environment instability by altering between variants of conditionality. However, due to its top-down hierarchical nature, conditionality was still vested on the heaving political parties, the very sources of shirking and non-compliance.

In this respect, the EU acted diametrically opposite of the MFT archetype, providing delayed reactions to the "moving" (as opposed to the inert) elements of the organisation. The underlying dialectic was that switching between ex-post and ex-ante conditionality would promote compliance, as governments would prioritize meeting external conditions to tangible incentives and avoid sanctions. This largely ignored that corruption was not a principal-agent problem which can be resolved if parties are simply motivated to enact reforms.

Instead, by focusing primarily on hierarchical short-term incentives and punitive measures, the EU completely overshot the “collective action problem” nature of corruption in Moldova. In contrast to fostering a country-wide anti-corruption culture, the EU appeared lost between its values and its interests; when pro-Russian Igor Dodon rose to power, the EU prioritised *realpolitik* and switched to ex-post conditionality, defying the normative compliance conditions it had itself previously set (Council of the EU, 2018). This serves as a sufficient but not necessary test, which supports the hypothesis, although it is not necessary as a standalone. In this context, it provides direct evidence of a contradiction between EU values and a pragmatic foreign policy, and a clear breach in its own strategy logic that shows inconsistency in the application of conditionality. This promotes the hypothesis that the EU became trapped in the conditionality framework and shows the inherent deep flaws in its strategy. Most importantly, the EU failed to strengthen the non-partisan institutions tasked with addressing corruption in Moldova. Although the EU conditioned financial aid on anti-corruption laws, it did not ensure their effective implementation. The judiciary remained susceptible to political influence and corruption, with key processes like appointments and disciplinary actions being largely controlled by oligarchs despite political commitment for depoliticization (ECHR, 2018; ICJ, 2019).

Similarly, the EU did not sufficiently address the inefficient and understaffed anti-corruption agencies. They continued to be fragmented in four largely hollow institutions, with informal patronage systems that allowed political actors to co-opt them. By focusing almost exclusively on legal reform and not the restructuring of the anti-corruption institutions and their operational culture, the EU inadvertently promoted the centralization of power. The same new stringent laws were, on multiple occasions, used by local political elites to ostracize political rivals (Hedlund, 2019). Moreover, politically salient cases were arbitrarily transferred from one agency to another to avoid prosecution (Prohntchi, 2018). A-la-carte agencies to tackle corruption can perpetuate and entrench corruption if not accompanied by attempts to address corruption culture (Back & Hadenius, 2008; Sung, 2004). This evidence can be interpreted as partially doubly decisive, providing sufficient and necessary evidence for the support of the research hypothesis. On one hand, it shows that legal reforms not only failed but were manipulated by elites. On the other hand, it undermines the alternative counter-hypothesis that the EU’s strategy was effective but blocked by unique Moldovan domestic politics; it hints that it was not simply the resistance of local elites but rather the design flaws of the EU’s policy themselves that allowed for manipulation. As a standalone it is only partially double decisive, because although it undermines the counter-hypothesis it does not explicitly provide evidence that the strategy also led to sub-optimal outcomes for the non-elite actors in Moldova. Yet, at the same time the top-down conditionality model resulted in a neglect of civil society and the front-line officials. As noted by Moldovan officials, there has existed a gap in understanding the importance of more robust civil society engagement at the local level (Atlantic Council, 2023). For the front-line officials, the EU did not manage to enhance the local public authorities’ capacity to act without political pressure (GIZ, 2019), did not achieve improving citizen awareness (OECD, 2022), and failed to enforce the Whistleblowers Protection Law, which was postponed for 3 years until mid-2018 (Prohntchi, 2018).

In the broader hypothesis that the EU's strategy would have required whole-of-society engagement to be effective, this evidence of failure to engage civil society acts as a necessary but not sufficient test passed for the research hypothesis. If the EU had effectively engaged civil society (which it did not) and had still failed, then this would weaken the argument. Moreover, it offers direct support for the research hypothesis of strategic misalignment as it showcases the ignorance of all elements of civil actors and sub-national political actors that could have provided critical support for sustainable anti-corruption policy. Ultimately, when combined with the evidence above it complements the partially doubly decisive evidence by also showing the inability of the EU's policy to engage the non-elite actors, thus creating a necessary and sufficient doubly decisive condition. Overall, the EU responded to the varying political willingness and democratic credentials of Moldovan governments through a single-loop feedback, tightening and loosening conditionality. To the extent that conditionality constitutes a hierarchical top-down mechanism, this strategy would have been effective if corruption constituted a principal-agent problem. However, given that the whole spectrum of Moldovan society is infused with corruption culture this strategy was actually ouroboric. Instead of demanding legal reforms, the EU could have explored a double-loop feedback mechanism, engaging the inert elements of its organisation more systematically and moving away from legal conditionality. Important issues like re-organising anti-corruption agencies, improving the public awareness on corruption, and battling oligarchic networks through deeper intelligence cooperation were largely ignored. Given Hood's (1995) Culture Theory typology, it appears that an egalitarian framework that holistically and symmetrically engages society would have been better apt to deal with the "collective action problem" nature of corruption in Moldova (Figure 1).

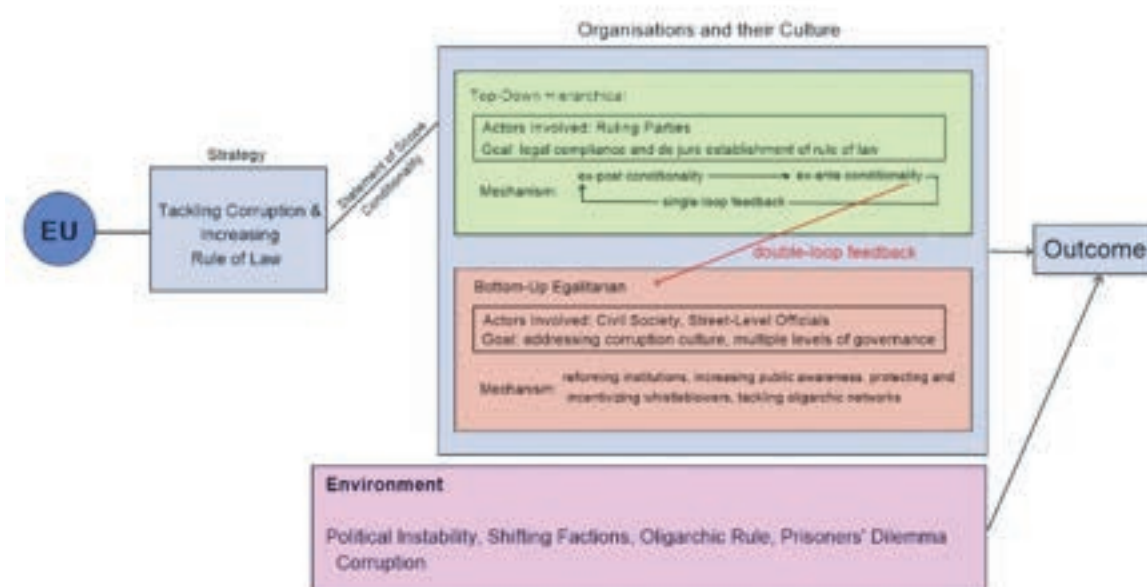


Figure 1: Description of the EU's strategy in Moldova under the lens of Roberts' Modern Firm Theory (2004), Hood's Cultural Theory and Approaches to Risk (1995), and Argyris' Single- and Double-Loop Feedback (1976). The EU's Strategy is materialised through conditionality, which binds the EU in a top-down hierarchical model. Feedback due to environment implications is channelled in the form of single-loop feedback, which translates to adjustments of the conditionality mechanism (green colour). In red is a hypothetical double-loop feedback scenario, which would lead the EU to an alternative egalitarian model, potentially more apt given Moldova's environment constraints.

In a wider context concerning the EU's enlargement process holistically, Moldova's experience is significant in providing three key lessons. Firstly, effective regime change is highlighted as contingent upon moving beyond legal harmonisation and actually addressing corruption culture at a societal level, particularly in the post-soviet space. Second, the EU's conditionality framework allows for a certain degree of within-agent variation which can prove efficient in certain context, but is still inflexible when it comes to engaging different actors. Simply put, all conditionality forms are nested in a hierarchical relationship that requires the participation of local elites. Finally, there appears to be a need for more consistent principle application, particularly in the cases where geopolitical considerations overlap with the EU's values. In the case of Moldova, this was a particular source of confusion that impeded outcomes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the EU's anti-corruption strategy in Moldova during the 2014-2020 period exemplifies a misalignment between strategy and implementation. Relying heavily on conditionality, a hierarchical top-down approach, the EU failed to address the systemic and cultural roots of corruption. The EU reacted to shifts in the environment through a single-loop feedback mechanism, oscillating between ex-ante and ex-post conditionality. This approach incorrectly assumed that combatting corruption was a matter of compliance of the governing parties. To make matters worse, conditionality forms varied asymptotically with good performance, and Moldovan governments that undermined the conditions set by conditionality were "rewarded" with laxer conditionality forms in an attempt to lure their cooperation. This embedded confusion between realpolitik and normative policy, further deteriorating policy.

Corruption in Moldova constitutes a multifaceted collective action problem, manifest not just in the governing parties but also in societal norms and practices. The EU failed to deliver an anti-corruption strategy that would engage these elements. This perpetuated Moldova's entrenched corruption, enabling oligarchic control. Moreover, the EU's narrow focus on legal reforms sidelined civil society and bottom-up policy, weakening local ownership and sustainability of reforms.

Ultimately, failure potentially lies in the EU's inability to adapt to Moldova's shifting political environment through a double-loop feedback process. The continuous use of conditionality limited effectiveness and, in some instances, unintentionally reinforced the very power structures it sought to dismantle. Given Moldova's constrictions, a more integrated approach based on an egalitarian rather than hierarchical culture would perhaps be essential for fostering genuine, long-term change.

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Framing Enlargement at the Margins: Media Discourses and EU Conditionality in Serbia and North Macedonia

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Abstract

This paper examines how domestic media in Serbia and North Macedonia have framed the EU enlargement process between 2018 and 2023, a period marked by institutional recalibration and growing geopolitical urgency. Through a comparative discourse analysis of four key national news outlets, the study interrogates how candidate countries' media narratives reflect evolving attitudes toward the EU, particularly in the context of the shifting geopolitical dynamics following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Serbia and North Macedonia, though regionally proximate and historically intertwined, exhibit diverging media discourses on enlargement. Serbian news media often portray the EU as demanding and unreliable. This perspective reflects domestic trends of democratic backsliding and alignment with alternative global actors (i.e., Russia and China). Conversely, North Macedonian media maintain a more hopeful but increasingly critical tone towards the EU. This narrative follows from successive vetoes from member states, despite strong domestic reform efforts. By analysing narratives around accession progress, vetoes, and regional identity, this paper highlights the tensions between EU conditionality and the public imagination of Europeaness. It argues that domestic news media do not merely reflect elite discourse

but actively shape public legitimacy for the enlargement project. This undermines the EU's strategic credibility by exposing inconsistencies between its normative commitments and political actions, weakening its leverage to promote democratic values, rule of law, and alignment with EU standards among candidate countries and in the wider international arena.

Keywords

EU enlargement, Western Balkans, media discourse, European identity, accession narratives

Introduction

For the first time in over a decade, enlargement is once again high on the EU agenda. For example, it recently decided to open accession talks with Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Furthermore, in 2023 Georgia received candidate status. Each of these choices signal the EU's renewed commitment to expansion as a political necessity. The EU sees expansion as a strategic imperative for securing regional stability, countering Russian influence, and strengthening internal coherence. However, for long-standing candidate countries in the Western Balkans (WB), such as Serbia and North Macedonia, this renewed emphasis on enlargement is met with both hope and deep ambivalence.

Since the early 2000s, the EU has promised the WB region a credible membership perspective. However, progress has been inconsistent. Serbia's negotiations, which have been ongoing since 2014, have stagnated amid concerns about democratic backsliding and insufficient alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (Ćemalović, 2020; Richter & Wunsch, 2020). North Macedonia, despite a historic name-change agreement with Greece in 2018, faced persistent vetoes by Bulgaria, delaying the opening of accession talks until 2022 (Mojsovska, 2021). These developments illustrate the increasing politicisation of enlargement and the fragility of public support in the region. While the EU continues to frame enlargement as a technocratic and value-driven process, domestic perceptions often diverge sharply (Zorić, 2025).

In this context, media plays a critical role. As agenda-setters and framers of political discourse, domestic news outlets shape public narratives around the EU and its enlargement strategy (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006). Yet, as much of the literature focuses on EU member states or candidate governments (Azrout et al., 2012; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004), the influence of domestic media in candidate countries has been comparatively understudied. This paper addresses that gap by analysing how media in Serbia and North Macedonia, two states often treated as part of a common "Western Balkans" framework, construct—and represent—contrasting discourses of Europeanness and enlargement.

Using a comparative discourse analysis of selected newspapers in each country, the study investigates two core themes: how EU accession progress is portrayed and how narratives of identity (European vs. Balkan) are constructed. These themes are especially relevant given the emergence of competing geopolitical alignments and discursive tropes of exclusion, such as "second-class membership" or "Europe's waiting room" (Teokarević, 2023; Vuković-Stamatović, 2021). By examining media narratives in these two candidate countries, this paper argues that EU enlargement is as much about symbolic belonging and public legitimacy as it is about fulfilling technocratic benchmarks. The analysis covers the period from 2018 to 2023, a time marked by renewed EU engagement through the new strategy as presented in "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans" (European Commission, 2018), the introduction of the "New Enlargement Methodology" (European Commission, 2020), and culminating in the "2023 Growth Plan" (European Commission, 2023). This five-year span captures key shifts in both EU strategy and domestic political contexts, offering a rich basis for tracing evolving media discourses.

In doing so, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the political and ideational challenges facing the future of EU enlargement. It highlights that any serious reform of the EU's institutional architecture must account for the deeply embedded discourses within candidate countries. Namely, these are discourses shaped not only by elite interests or conditionality, but by how Europe is imagined, contested, and communicated to the public.

The next chapter presents a literature review, followed by a short discussion on methodology. After that, the study turns to the comparative analysis of the media discourses, and lastly some conclusions are drawn.

Literature review

This chapter reviews the relevant academic literature on EU enlargement, media framing, and identity construction in candidate countries in the WB. It connects the dynamics of accession progress and identity narratives to broader theoretical debates on Europeanisation, EU institutional conditionality, and the role of the media in shaping public discourse. The review also foregrounds how the tension between normative and geopolitical goals in the EU's enlargement policy shapes both perceptions and legitimacy of the accession process.

Enlargement and Accession: Between Conditionality and Disillusionment

EU enlargement toward the WB has long been grounded in the principle of conditionality. This holds that progress in the accession process is contingent upon the fulfilment of normative and technical criteria. This approach, traditionally rooted in liberal intergovernmentalism, assumes that rational state actors respond to material incentives and rule-based benchmarks (Moravcsik & Vachudova, 2003; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004). Furthermore, the 'external incentive model' posits that candidate countries adopt EU norms primarily due to the attractiveness of full membership (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2004, p. 661).

However, the limitations of this model have become increasingly apparent. In the WB, conditionality has yielded partial or "fake" compliance (Noutcheva, 2009, p. 1065). This raises doubts about the transformative power of EU conditionality in weak or semi-authoritarian states. Serbia is an excellent example of this. Since 2014, it has been in accession negotiations with the EU. However, media portrayals and public sentiment reflect increasing disillusionment towards the EU. Stagnation in negotiations and unresolved disputes, such as Kosovo, contribute to this dynamic (Ćemalović, 2020; Teokarević, 2023). However, in North Macedonia, frustrations have centered on repeated vetoes, despite significant reform efforts and constitutional amendments (Mojsovska, 2021). These experiences suggest that the accession process is not merely technical but also deeply political. It is shaped by the strategic interests of existing member states and broader geopolitical shifts (Anghel & Jones, 2022). The EU's increasing securitisation of enlargement has influenced this process. Specifically, it has linked enlargement to controlling migration and geopolitical containment. This has reframed the process from value-based community building to a pragmatic geopolitical tool (Webb, 2022; Anghel & Džankić, 2023). Beyond institutional incentives and strategic calculations, however, the enlargement process also operates on a symbolic and cultural level, shaping and being shaped by narratives of identity, belonging, and Europeaness.

Europeanisation as Socialisation: Identity, Belonging, and Symbolic Geography

The concept of Europeanisation offers a useful framework for exploring how domestic actors—media included—internalise or contest EU norms and values. While early accounts of Europeanisation focused on institutional adaptation and rule transfer (Börzel & Risse, 2003), later work emphasises social constructivist perspectives, highlighting identity, belonging, and discursive framing (Tanil, 2014, p. 484). From this vantage point, accession is not only about fulfilling Copenhagen criteria but also about narratives of Europeaness—how candidate countries imagine their place within Europe. Serbia and North Macedonia illustrate divergent imaginaries, meaning different visions of the EU’s positionality. Serbia has often framed the EU as an “impossible hurdle” or even a “blackmailer” (Teokarević, 2023, pp. 181–184). In contrast, North Macedonia has tended to maintain a hopeful but increasingly frustrated image of the EU as a necessary partner blocked by unjust vetoes (Vuković-Stamatović, 2021, p. 589).

This tension is compounded by the symbolic geography of the Balkans as Europe’s “internal other” (Vezovnik & Šarić, 2015, p. 238); a space simultaneously inside and outside Europe. The metaphors used to describe the region—such as “waiting room,” “bridge,” “powder keg,” or “endless candidate”—reinforce the sense of permanent liminality (Vuković-Stamatović, 2021, pp. 578–603; Bakić-Hayden, 1995). Media discourses in the region often reproduce or resist these tropes, thereby shaping public perceptions of whether EU membership is desirable, attainable, or even meaningful.

The Role of Media in Shaping Enlargement Discourses

The media in candidate countries play a dual role: it reflects elite discourse while also shaping public attitudes toward EU integration. Media framing theory suggests that how issues are presented, via metaphors, agency attribution, or emotional tone, can significantly influence public opinion (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2006). In the context of enlargement, the media does not simply report developments; it constructs narratives of progress, failure, betrayal, or hope. Recent studies have shown that media framing in the WB is highly polarised and politicised, often split along ideological lines (Krstić, 2023). In Serbia, conservative outlets portray the EU as intrusive or duplicitous, while liberal ones are more cautiously optimistic but still critical. In North Macedonia, similar divides exist. Pro-EU sentiment has generally been stronger across the political spectrum until the repeated vetoes by Greece and Bulgaria began to erode that consensus (Blanuša et al., 2021).

Moreover, Balkan media frequently draw on identity-based narratives. They oscillate between Euro-fundamentalism—idealising the EU as a civilisational goal—and Euro-vilification—depicting it as hypocritical or neo-imperial (Blanuša et al., 2021, pp. 185–213). This discursive instability reflects deeper societal anxieties about belonging, sovereignty, and historical trauma (Todorova, 2009; Obad, 2014).

Thus, examining media discourse offers a valuable lens for understanding how the EU enlargement process is legitimised, contested, or rendered ambiguous in public consciousness. As the EU embarks on what may be a new

enlargement wave, these mediated narratives are critical to understanding the political feasibility and symbolic power of further integration. The literature that this chapter briefly discussed reveals a complex interplay between institutional processes, identity formation, and media discourses. While the EU continues to present enlargement as a rational and criteria-based progression, domestic media in Serbia and North Macedonia show that public legitimacy often hinges on narratives of fairness, recognition, and symbolic inclusion.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative discourse analysis to examine how domestic media in Serbia and North Macedonia framed EU accession progress and identity narratives between 2018 and 2023. The analysis is based on a Discourse Historical Approach (DHA), a method within critical discourse analysis. In particular, it contextualises texts within their broader socio-political and historical environments (Krzyżanowski, 2019). This method allows for tracing how language constructs political meanings and imaginaries, particularly in contexts marked by contested belonging and fluctuating public trust in the EU.

The selected media outlets represent both ideological diversity and national relevance. From Serbia, *Politika* (conservative) and *Danas* (liberal) have been selected. In turn, *Nova Makedonija* (conservative) and *Libertas* (liberal), will be used to analyse media narratives in North Macedonia. These outlets were chosen based on accessibility of archives, influence on public discourse, and ideological balance. This allows for a comparative analysis of competing media constructs. Articles were retrieved using keyword searches in Serbian and Macedonian. The terms included “European Union”, “enlargement”, “accession”, “reforms”, “veto”.

The analysis is operationalised through discourse topics, discursive strategies, and linguistic means. Discourse topics are the general themes identified in the narrative of enlargement. Discursive strategies refer to the ways in which articles construct meaning and shape perceptions.

Linguistic means are the specific language devices employed to enable these strategies, such as metaphors, references, and argumentation patterns (Aydın-Düzgüt, 2014, p. 137). To account for the particularity of news articles as a form of text, the framework also examines descriptive tools, such as the use of adjectives, modality, and adverbs. These reveal how agency is assigned to different actors and feed into interpretive strategies such as appeals to expertise, irony, or rebuttals (Dersley, 2020, p. 12).

In this investigation, the DHA is limited to textual sources and excludes visual media. However, the DHA framework still offers a valuable lens through which to explore how accession is imagined, challenged, or legitimised through discourse. It reveals the layered ways in which symbolic and political meanings are negotiated in candidate countries at this critical juncture in the EU’s enlargement trajectory.

Accession Progress: Between Strategic Fatigue and Symbolic Exclusion

Serbia: Skepticism, Strategic Balance, and a Stalled Process

In Serbia, both conservative and liberal media exhibit an overarching narrative of skepticism and disenchantment with the EU accession process. A recurrent framing device in the conservative *Politika* is the metaphor of waiting or stagnation. For example, in the phrase “once again in focus”, used repetitively to describe the fatigue and lack of progress of the EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina dialogue (Спаловић, 2020). Such linguistic repetition subtly reinforces the narrative of strategic inertia, wherein EU engagement is cast as ritualistic rather than results-oriented. Moreover, *Politika* uses modal verbs and hedging to convey uncertainty and conditionality. For example: “possible opening of new chapters if...” (Баковић, 2019; Спаловић, 2022). This modality constructs the EU as a gatekeeper wielding indefinite authority, with Serbia cast as a passive subject of opaque decision-making. *Danas*, while ideologically distinct (liberal), deploys similar discursive strategies, albeit with a more critical tone. There is a lot of repetition and temporal adverbs (“again”, “yet again”, “once again”) to underscore a sense of ongoing exclusion. It also draws on irony and evaluative adjectives (“excuses that don’t hold water”) to discredit the EU’s rationale for lack of progress (Радосављевић, 2019; Дојче веле, 2020; RTS, 2022). Such linguistic devices signal discursive skepticism, where the EU is seen not just as inconsistent but increasingly performative in its enlargement rhetoric.

In both outlets, the European Commission is frequently reduced to a non-agentive actor, appearing in passive constructions —“EC has assessed,” “it is stated in a report” (Дојче веле, 2022). This strips the EU of political intentionality and reinforces the perception of institutional detachment. As Krstić (2023) notes, this rhetorical depersonalisation contributes to public perceptions of the EU as an abstract and unaccountable force.

These discursive patterns are consistent with scholarly critiques of the EU’s conditionality framework. Noutcheva (2009) argues that the EU’s normative power is often undermined by its reliance on ambiguous incentives and the strategic manipulation of criteria. Similarly, Richter and Wunsch (2020) highlight how conditionality can paradoxically entrench state capture, especially when formal progress is rewarded despite democratic backsliding. Finally, a key theme in Serbian media is the externalisation of responsibility. In both *Politika* and *Danas*, the lack of accession progress is framed not as Serbia’s failure to reform, but as a consequence of shifting EU goalposts. This is evident in editorials criticising the lack of new chapters or perceiving the EU as unjustly privileging Ukraine and Moldova in the 2023 Enlargement Package (*Politika Online*, 2022 (b); *BBC News na srpskom*, 2023). Such arguments mirror Ćemalović’s (2020) analysis that the New Enlargement Methodology has introduced more intergovernmental discretion and less predictability, fuelling perceptions of political favouritism rather than meritocracy.

North Macedonia: Hope Deferred and the Vocabulary of Betrayal

Media coverage in North Macedonia constructs a different, though no less critical, discourse, one of deferred hope, institutional frustration, and symbolic exclusion. Immediately following the 2018 Prespa Agreement, headlines in the conservative Nova Makedonija such as “The road is open for negotiations with the EU” (Нова Македонија, 2018) employed forward-looking modality (“chance”, “opportunity”, “probably”) to frame EU accession as attainable and imminent. However, this discursive optimism eroded rapidly after the Bulgarian vetoes.

Articles such as “Entry in the EU – a moving target that constantly goes further away” (Нова Македонија, 2021) mobilise metaphor and nominalisation to represent enlargement as a decaying promise. The image of “dust gathering” connotes abandonment, while the nominal “perspective” strips the concept of dynamism or agency. The EU here becomes a silent bystander, allowing bilateral grievances to derail collective goals—echoing the critique by Mojsovska (2021) that the EU’s enlargement strategy lacks coherence and credibility. In the liberal outlet Libertas, the dominant rhetorical device is the antithesis between sacrifice and reward. Editorials such as “How Stones Break” (Поповски, 2022) list North Macedonia’s strategic concessions – name change, constitutional amendments, minority protections – only to highlight the absence of reciprocal action from the EU. This is often reinforced by interrogative constructions (“Is this worth it?”), which position the EU as morally – not just procedurally – failing. Furthermore, Libertas frequently uses evaluative adverbs (“unfair”, “groundless”) to construct the vetoes as unjust and baseless (Либертас, 2022 (a) and (c)). These lexical choices align with Blanuša et al.’s (2021) framework of *Eurovilification*, in which the EU is seen as a hypocritical actor wielding its power to appease internal nationalist pressures rather than uphold shared values.

At the same time, however, pro-European sentiment remains rhetorically embedded in a “no alternative” discourse. In articles like “Skopje Remains on the Stand...” (Либертас 2022 (c)), the EU is still described as the “strategic goal”, even when the path to that goal is labelled humiliating or degrading. This duality reflects Teokarević’s (2023) observation that in the WB, the EU can simultaneously occupy the role of saviour and oppressor, of both being the only way forward and the primary source of delay.

Comparative Insight: Shared Disillusionment, Diverging Discourses

While media narratives in both Serbia and North Macedonia express disappointment with the EU, the discursive logic behind this disappointment differs significantly. In Serbia, the dominant narrative is one of strategic skepticism: the EU is portrayed as overreaching, inconsistent, and hypocritical. The rhetorical focus is on sovereignty, external pressure, and double standards. Serbia’s media reinforces a posture of resistance and self-reliance, even when maintaining nominal commitment to the EU path.

In contrast, North Macedonian media exhibits a narrative of moral betrayal: the EU is not too demanding, but too indifferent. The frustration stems from the EU’s perceived failure to reward reform and prevent member-state obstructionism. The EU is framed less as an aggressor and more as an unreliable partner whose passivity legitimises injustice.

These discourses reflect each country's broader political positioning. Serbia's semi-authoritarian leadership and geopolitical hedging shape a media narrative that casts the EU as an external imposition. North Macedonia's pro-European government and reformist image, by contrast, lead the media to lament that good behaviour is punished rather than rewarded.

Ultimately, both discourses contribute to the erosion of EU legitimacy, but through different symbolic registers. Serbia critiques the EU's power; North Macedonia critiques its lack of principled action. This divergence underscores the importance of understanding EU enlargement not simply as a technocratic process, but as a deeply contested symbolic and communicative project in the region.

Identity Narratives: Europeanness, Balkanism, and Symbolic Belonging

Media in both Serbia and North Macedonia do not merely report on the mechanics of enlargement; they actively construct and contest narratives of identity and belonging. These narratives beg the asking of deeper symbolic questions to be addressed: *Who belongs in Europe? Who defines Europeanness? And is EU membership a recognition of identity or merely a political transaction?* This section explores how media in both countries discursively construct the EU as a space of contested belonging, either through symbolic distancing (Serbia) or painful aspiration (North Macedonia).

Serbia: The Ambivalence of Europeanness and the Discourse of Sovereignty

In Serbian media, identity narratives are dominated by an ambivalent relationship to Europe. On the one hand, *Politika* articles invoke historical and cultural Europeanness emphasising Serbia's Christian heritage, Enlightenment traditions, and geographical location (*Politika Online*, 2022 [a]). On the other hand, this identity is often positioned in contrast to Brussels, which is framed as politically hypocritical or morally decayed. For instance, the EU is described as "a lost community without identity", suggesting that the EU itself lacks the moral and civilisational authority to define Europe (Баковић, 2019).

This discourse draws heavily on Balkanist tropes, which reframe Serbia's liminal position as a site of strategic autonomy rather than marginality. As Vezovnik and Šarić (2015) argue, the Balkans have historically been portrayed as Europe's "internal other", simultaneously included and excluded. Serbian media repurpose this symbolic geography by deploying reappropriated othering, casting the EU not as an aspirational centre but as a decaying periphery. *Politika* editorials often use moral contrast framing, referring to "our values" as more authentic or consistent than those of Western institutions.

In *Danas*, identity narratives are more conflicted. While the paper maintains a broadly pro-European editorial line, it nonetheless features content that reflects cultural fatigue with the EU. Articles express concern that Serbia's Europeanness is continually questioned, despite deep historical, educational, and cultural ties. In *Danas*, the EU is often personified through expressions such as "Europe does not recognise us", reflecting a perceived lack of symbolic reciprocity (Čongradin, 2020).

symbolic reciprocity (Čongradin, 2020).

These tensions echo academic analyses that view Serbia's identity discourse as performative and strategic. As Aydın-Düzgit (2014) argues, EU identity itself is a constructed discourse of exclusion, wherein candidate countries must continuously perform Europeanness to be recognised. In the Serbian media landscape, however, this performance is increasingly resisted, replaced by a discourse of sovereign equivalence rather than subordination.

North Macedonia: Aspirational Europeanness and the Discourse of Recognition

In contrast, media in North Macedonia consistently frame EU integration as a matter of recognition and validation, not merely of policy alignment, but of identity. Nova Makedonija frequently refers to North Macedonia as a "part of Europe", employing inclusion markers that naturalise the country's European identity and frame EU membership as overdue recognition (Павловска, 2019). The EU is portrayed as an actor morally indebted to the country for its sacrifices.

This discursive framing relies on the morality of commitment: North Macedonia has "done its part"; changed its name, reformed its judiciary, protected minority rights, and thus deserves entry. The frequent use of evaluative adjectives ("worthy", "civilised", "consistent") constructs the nation as a worthy member, implicitly challenging the fairness of the EU's ongoing hesitation (Павловска, 2019; Павловска, 2023). In *Libertas*, identity narratives often express symbolic frustration. The outlet critiques the logic by which North Macedonia must repeatedly prove its Europeanness, despite fulfilling its commitments. This is particularly evident in articles that use rhetorical questioning to highlight the tension between formal compliance and symbolic exclusion (ДВ, 2022; Либертас, 2022 (b)). These narratives suggest that the EU, by privileging the grievances of existing member states, becomes complicit in the delegitimisation of North Macedonian identity.

Furthermore, both Nova Makedonija and *Libertas* use metaphors of pilgrimage and trial to describe the enlargement path referring to the process as a "path to Europe" filled with "tests" and "obstacles" (Јовановски, 2020; Либертас, 2022 (b)). This aligns with Todorova's (2009) analysis of Balkan identity as perpetually tested by external judges, never fully accepted as European.

Yet, unlike in Serbia, this marginality is not reclaimed or inverted. Rather, it is endured with pro-European media continuing to frame EU accession as the ultimate goal, despite the symbolic costs. As Blanuša et al. (2021) argue, this "Eurofundamentalist" stance constructs Europeanness as essential and aspirational, even when the path is experienced as degrading or unjust.

Comparative Insight: Shared Aspirations, Divergent Frames

While both Serbian and North Macedonian media engage deeply with questions of identity, their discursive logics diverge in crucial ways. In Serbia, identity narratives are increasingly framed through ambivalence and autonomy. The EU is often portrayed as morally diminished and politically unreliable, while Serbia's Europeaness is rhetorically affirmed yet strategically distanced. Media do not reject European identity outright, but they resist the notion that it must be validated externally, recasting the EU as a declining authority, unworthy of symbolic leadership.

By contrast, in North Macedonia, identity narratives are grounded in aspiration and validation. The EU is framed as a space that Macedonia naturally belongs to, but which persistently withholds recognition. Here, Europeaness is not strategically distanced but emotionally pursued. The symbolic injustice of being kept outside the EU becomes a central media narrative, especially following bilateral blockages.

In short, Serbia's media discourse reflects defiant ambivalence, while North Macedonia's reflects wounded longing. Both challenge the EU's self-image as a fair arbiter of values and inclusion but they do so through opposite emotional registers. Understanding these narratives is critical not only for interpreting public opinion, but for assessing how legitimacy is built or eroded in the EU's enlargement strategy.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how domestic media in Serbia and North Macedonia have framed EU accession and constructed identity narratives during a pivotal phase in the European Union's enlargement trajectory. Analysing media coverage from 2018 to 2023, the study has shown that, while both countries express disillusionment with the EU, they do so through markedly different discursive logics reflecting diverging relationships to Europe, to sovereignty, and to the symbolic stakes of membership.

In Serbia, media narratives increasingly frame the EU as a politically inconsistent and morally diminished actor. The EU is portrayed as overly demanding and strategically opaque, especially regarding Kosovo and CFSP alignment. Discursively, Serbian media construct a Europe that is simultaneously essential and alien, an actor whose values are invoked when convenient, but whose legitimacy as a gatekeeper is increasingly questioned. The media's use of metaphors of stagnation, sovereign assertiveness, and EU hypocrisy reflects a broader trend of strategic distancing. While formal support for EU membership remains official policy, the symbolic attachment appears increasingly conditional and transactional.

North Macedonia, in contrast, has cultivated a public discourse of aspirational Europeaness, centred on narratives of sacrifice and unfulfilled promise. Media across the political spectrum frame the country's efforts — particularly the name change and constitutional amendments — as profound acts of commitment to European values. However, repeated vetoes and EU inaction are constructed as betrayals of this commitment, undermining the credibility of enlargement as a merit-based process. The EU is thus framed less as an oppressor than as a passive enabler of injustice, complicit in the erosion of candidate state dignity through its failure to shield enlargement from bilateral

blockages. Still, EU membership remains symbolically indispensable, even as the discourse is laced with emotional fatigue and growing skepticism.

Together, these findings demonstrate that EU enlargement is not simply a technocratic procedure, but a discursive battleground in which legitimacy, identity, and belonging are constantly negotiated. As Europeanisation becomes less about norm transfer and more about geopolitical signalling, public narratives in candidate countries may gain renewed importance. Media discourse shapes not only how enlargement is perceived but also whether it remains politically viable and symbolically resonant.

For the future of enlargement, especially in the WB, these insights carry two key implications. First, the EU must recognise that its legitimacy in the region hinges not just on policy coherence, but on narrative consistency. Discrepancies between stated values and political outcomes erode public trust and feed into discourses of exclusion, manipulation, or irrelevance. Second, enlargement must reckon with the emotional and identity-based investments made by candidate societies. For countries like North Macedonia, symbolic recognition matters as much as legal alignment; for Serbia, perceived impositions provoke resistance that undermines reform incentives.

As the EU repositions enlargement within a broader geopolitical agenda, including Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkans, it must better account for the discursive landscapes it operates within. Without addressing how Europeanness is framed, negotiated, and contested in local media, the EU risks undermining its own normative power from within.

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Talking Enlargement – the Push and Pull of Elite Security Rhetoric on EU Enlargement

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Abstract

How political elites communicate about enlargement is unique in its capacity to represent either a push or pull factor affecting EU enlargement. This paper uses the Copenhagen School and the concept of securitisation as a theoretical basis to analyse how enlargement was established as a security imperative during previous rounds of enlargement. Based on these findings, the paper recommends changes to learn from past successes and improve public and elite levels of support for enlargement while alleviating potential fears. Combining enlargement with already securitised issues, the promotion of the benefits of enlargement in contentious policy fields and a less damaging use of 'no exceptions rhetoric' are amongst the recommendations this paper proposes.

Keywords

Copenhagen School, enlargement discourse, securitisation, public support

Introduction

„The Union shall develop a special relationship with neighbouring countries, aiming to establish an area of prosperity and good neighbourliness, founded on the values of the Union and characterised by close and peaceful relations based on cooperation.“

– Treaty of Lisbon (European Union, 2007, p. 15)

Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has irreversibly changed the way European Union (EU) commitments, such as those in the Treaty of Lisbon quoted above, are understood. The prospect of war on the European continent, once a distant memory, has once again become a reality.

Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the relationship between the EU and neighbouring countries, such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, was defined by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The ENP was meant to encompass countries with no short- or medium-term prospects of joining the EU, in contrast to long-term candidates like those in the Western Balkans (Synhaievskia, 2023). These dynamics, however, have changed rather extensively.

Both Moldova and Ukraine received candidate status in June 2022, a little over four months after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia also received candidate status in December 2022 and 2023 respectively. The opening of accession negotiations in June 2022 with Albania, who has been a candidate since June 2014 (Eurostat, n.d.), stands to further emphasise how the war in Ukraine has undeniably reinvigorated the Union's enlargement policy: a project which had lain mostly dormant, suffering from enlargement fatigue, for over a decade. It is, therefore, undeniable that the re-emergence of armed conflict on European soil has given new energy to the enlargement processes. Yet, the feeling that EU expansion is not really moving forward remains widespread (Kaiser, 2024; O'Brennan, 2024).

Public discourse and engagement with broad audiences are indeed among the most influential aspects underpinning the progress of enlargement. Similarly, communications with and between different political elites plays an equally important role in advancing the EU's neighbourhood agenda. Indeed, support from both the public and political leaders is essential to avoid roadblocks along the way. Furthermore, the fact that political communication surrounding enlargement can represent either a push factor, preventing progress on enlargement, or a pull factor, bringing enlargement closer, makes it particularly interesting, while remaining an under-discussed topic.

Thus, this paper assesses issues relating to communication surrounding enlargement, especially as it relates to support for the policy, and seeks to present ways forward based on past experiences. To do this, a theoretical foundation based on the Copenhagen School of securitisation will be used. The central role of security in enlargement, as laid out later, makes this choice of theory fitting. The theory's capacity to consider security in broad terms and link security communication to the advancement of policy objectives further solidifies the choice. After a brief theoretical introduction, this paper will present issues relating to public and elite support, as well as communication shortcomings which are currently hampering the advancement of EU enlargement. Subsequently, an analysis of securitisation in past enlargement attempts will help understand how issues like the ones we are seeing have successfully been dealt with before. This analysis will serve as a basis for the recommendations that follow.

Theoretical Background

First developed by Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan in the 1990s, the Copenhagen School considers security to be constructed through an inter-subjective process and thus, not an easily definable, given concept, as is often assumed (Stępką, 2022). This means that the notion of "security" per se does not have an unequivocally and unanimously accepted objective definition. Instead, the meaning of security is actively constructed, forged, and shaped by political elites via public discourse and collective narratives. What makes the theory interesting is the combination of a statement many might instinctively agree with – „[t]he special nature of security threats justifies the use of extraordinary measures to handle them" (Buzan, Wæver, & Wilde, 1998, p. 21) – with a rather more complex belief: "by definition something is a security problem when the elites declare it so" (Wæver, 1995, p. 54). While the elites' definition will be discussed later, one can already affirm that, following the Copenhagen School, any policy area can be considered a security issue and thus, given the right circumstances, extraordinary measures may be justifiable.

Moving issues into the realm of security can serve to significantly accelerate policy advancements. Actors may be able to „break free of procedures or rules [they] would otherwise be bound by" (Buzan et al., 1998, p. 25) if they manage to argue the imminent, existential threat which calls for such action. Actors are described as having raised a particular issue above the realm of "normal politics" as an exceptional measure necessary in a given moment to fight against existential threats (Stępką, 2022, p. 22). Indeed, any issue can be non-political (not dealt with by the state or within public debate), political (part of public policy and dealt with by government decisions, this is the realm of "normal politics") or raised to the security realm (an existential threat requiring security measures). In practice, policy issues often pass between these realms (Buzan et al., 1998). The process by which this happens, and thus by which extreme measures become possible or are no-longer tolerated, is what is important in our case.

This process essentially boils down to three essential aspects: (1) so-called "speech acts", (2) a logic of exception, and (3) actor-audience interaction. Speech acts refer to elites defining a certain issue as an existential threat, thereby creating „a rupture in the common understanding of an issue" (Stępką, 2022, p. 20). Given that a successful speech act requires the actor to have the necessary authority, it is „political elites, governmental agencies, bureaucrats, and pressure groups, that hold a special position in defining and implementing security" (Stępką, 2022, p. 20), and who are, thus, to be considered the main elites relevant to securitisation processes. Such a presentation of an existential threat already brings in the logic of exception, whereby an issue is presented as more important than others. Priority is called for, as all other issues may cease to matter if this problem is not dealt with (Buzan et al., 1998). Naturally, a move to securitise a given issue can only be successful if accepted as such by the relevant audience (Buzan et al., 1998). It should be noted that the audience can be different depending on the situation. It could be, for instance, the general public or a group of other political elites. There might even be multiple audiences at the same time (Salter, 2011). Consequently, the ideal result of securitisation can be seen as reaching high levels of acceptance for significant policy advancements in a given field.

Problems

The first issue which will be highlighted with the coming examples is the fact that enlargement has long been understood as a potential threat to EU member states and their economies. In France for instance, labour market threats relating to a potential post-enlargement influx of migrants and the possibility of enlargement objectives hindering other EU integration goals have often been central fears (Hajko, 2024). Particularly, fears relating to the labour market present a first case where migration has been largely securitised to the detriment of EU expansion (Hajko, 2024). The removal of all duties and quotas on Ukrainian imports to the EU in June 2022 (European Commission, 2024) might have enhanced the framing of EU enlargement as an economic risk as well. Indeed, farmers took the streets to protest against the influx of cheap agricultural goods they could not compete with, and several Eastern European countries demanded import duties on Ukrainian grain (Commodity Information Service, 2024). With the partial securitisation of migration and the presence of other important issues, stoking fears about future enlargement waves is hardly difficult.

While the war in Ukraine has seen perspectives change, in many cases, such shifts have not proven as significant or universal, as might have been expected. While public opinion on enlargement, particularly in more sceptical countries, has improved (Panchuk, 2024), hesitant voices remain. While it is true that the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine saw an outpouring of solidarity from the EU, some countries, namely France, the Netherlands, and a handful of other Western European countries, were quick to make clear that they did not support an accelerated accession process for the EU's Eastern neighbour in March 2022 (Hajko, 2024). French President Emmanuel Macron's immediate assertion that standards allowing for a country to join the EU would not be lowered (Macron, 2022) further added to the clear message that no exceptions would be made. Such rhetoric clearly violates the logic of exception within the Copenhagen School, therefore significantly hampering any attempts at a securitisation of EU enlargement to favour progress in accession processes.

In general, the current Russian aggression in Ukraine cannot be linked to higher levels of public support for enlargement. While the war has positively influenced public opinion in several member states towards potentially admitting Ukraine to the EU, other candidate countries have not benefited from this. Support for Serbia and Albania's accessions to the EU has even declined since Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Panchuk, 2024). Other studies have found the war unable to alter a downward trend in support for enlargement that has been ongoing since 2002 (Hajko, 2024). These findings seem to stand in stark contrast to a perceived reinvigoration of the enlargement process, putting into question the reasons why the war in Ukraine failed to dispel or at least partly reverse enlargement fatigue.

Significant differences in both goals and communications of political elites may help understand contrasting perceptions on where the EU is heading in terms of enlargement. While several Western European member states did voice their scepticism towards renewed energy in enlargement proceedings in March 2022, eight Eastern and central European member states simultaneously called for a clear prospect at future accession for their Ukrainian neighbours (Hajko, 2024). Furthermore, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has

asserted that enlargement must not be made to wait on internal EU reform (von der Leyen, 2023). Contrary to von der Leyen's statement, French President E. Macron perceives enlargement without prior vertical integration as repeating mistakes of the past (Macron, 2023). While such declarations remain just examples, they serve as proof of the lack of a unified message amongst European political elites. This undoubtedly hinders positive developments towards enlargement in the opinions of European citizens.

Options

Understanding the options the EU has moving forward means understanding the past. Studying previous rounds of enlargement brings one to the realisation, that „[t]he relationship between enlargement and security concerns is [...] key to understanding the enlargement process“ (Higashino, 2004, p. 348). Indeed, it is well documented that peace and security have played a significant role in framing and justifying enlargement since the 1990s (Higashino, 2004; O'Brennan, 2007). Previously, the geopolitical and security scholarship focused on expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, considering EU enlargement as a political rather than geopolitical process, and therefore without significant security relevance. In this sense, a major shift occurred in the aftermaths of the Cold War which saw significant violence and instability on the continent. European integration and expansion of the EU became synonymous with enlarging the European security community (O'Brennan, 2007) and, thereby, the potential for stability in volatile times and regions.

In fact, geopolitical considerations played a massive role in the last three rounds of enlargement (2004, 2007 and 2013). The 1990s saw the eruption of horrific violence in the former Yugoslav Republics, as well as instability in Russia. Both were considered principal threats presented by European political elites, as they stood for the possibility of a return to mass instability in Europe and the reappearance of physical dividing lines, like those seen during the Cold War, across the continent (Higashino, 2004). Potential inter-state border conflicts – most notably between Hungary and Romania over the large Hungarian minority in Romania – further enhanced the risk of instability (O'Brennan, 2007). Beyond these classical security concerns, environmental considerations were raised, particularly considering the apparent inability of Eastern European countries to prevent environmental disasters (Zielonka, 2003). Naturally, such issues are important during a country's accession process; however, in studying how securitisation was used to move forward enlargement more generally, analysing how such factors were used discursively to justify enlargement is extremely important in our case.

An analysis into communications from a range of different political elites across the EU-15 serves to confirm the relevance and usage of geopolitical crises in the enlargement process. Góra (2021) found that the most frequent argument in favour of enlargement used by members of the European Parliament (MEPs) lays in the policy's capacity to have a positive impact on the candidate countries by promoting democracy and European values. Furthermore, members of the Dáil Éireann (the main chamber of the Irish parliament) primarily pointed out the opportunity to bring security and stability to the affected regions (Góra, 2021). Beyond parliaments, Commissioners were also clear on the security and norm-based advantages of enlargement. Indeed, in 2002,

then Commission President Romano Prodi presented enlargement as exporting stability and uniting the continent on a basis of shared values (Prodi, 2002). The same can be said for national political elites, like then Danish prime minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen who linked lasting peace in Europe to enlargement (Rasmussen, 2002). Similarly, then British prime minister Tony Blair made a rather clear and blunt statement: „Without enlargement, Western Europe will always be faced with the threat of instability, conflict and mass migration on its borders.” (Blair, 2000, p. 3)

While this last paragraph might lead to the belief that Europe was far more unified in its positions towards enlargement pre-2004, disputes and disagreements still existed, much like those that can be seen today. Indeed, Higashino's (2004) description of the main competing positions at the very early stages of the accession process to Central and Eastern European countries presents similarities to debates in recent years:

„securiti[s]ing moves represented by the Commission, urg[ed] the EU to enlarge in order to build security in the [central and eastern European countries], and those represented by the French government [...] warned not to take any substantial decisions with regard to enlargement when [these countries] were facing considerable security problems.” (Higashino, 2004, p. 356)

Furthermore, the presidency conclusions of the Corfu European Council in 1994 stipulated that „[t]he institutional conditions for ensuring the proper functioning of the Union must be created [...] before accession negotiations begin” (European Parliament, 1994). While security arguments favouring the prioritisation of enlargement eventually won out, it is important to underline that this kind of rather fundamental issue existed in the context of the 2004 enlargement as well. Learning from its resolution is how today's issues can be solved. Going beyond general geopolitical considerations, specific developments in conflicts on the European continent served to move enlargement forward in the early 2000s. Specifically, the worsening situation in Kosovo reinvigorated accession processes (Higashino, 2004). In fact, perspectives widely changed, with the Commission proposing new kinds of association agreements with Western Balkan countries and stressing the important role the EU had to play in ensuring stability in the region (European Commission, 1999a). Regarding enlargement, the United Kingdom stipulated that the EU must start accession negotiations following threats in a country's neighbourhood in order to fight against negative influences. This position became widely accepted (Higashino, 2004).

Furthermore, the Commission went on to highlight enlargement as the best way to secure peace and security in Europe while calling for resolute and courageous action on enlargement (European Commission, 1999b). In fact, it was the conflict in Kosovo that led to a complete change in logic behind EU enlargement. While previously peace and security were understood as prerequisites for a country's accession to the EU, enlargement became a tool to advance peace and security. This paradigm shift gave the EU a more active role

and ensured that countries are not on their own on the treacherous path to stability.

Briefly leaving the constructivist Copenhagen School aside, realist positions also support this shift. From a realist point of view, EU enlargement can be understood as a project to increase the EU's geopolitical power in relation to other international actors (O'Brennan, 2007). Considering this from a present-day perspective, in countries such as Georgia, Serbia, and Ukraine, enlargement represents an option to counteract foreign influence – especially from Russia and China. The similarities to previous enlargements, which balanced against the instability brought by the fall of the Soviet Union, (O'Brennan, 2007) are undeniable. Moreover, it could be argued that the EU has, both institutionally and rhetorically, committed itself to the integration of European liberal societies (Schimmelfennig, 2001). Combining this logic with political elites claiming enlargement could consolidate democracies on the EU's borders could undermine elites attempting to argue against the process (Schimmelfennig, 2001).

While the current-day geopolitical environment is not the same as during previous rounds of enlargement, many previously used arguments can still serve to push this round of enlargement forward. Russia is still – and maybe even more so – perceived as a threat. Thus, the idea of framing enlargement as an „effort to 'lock in' the [Eastern European] states into the EU orbit and guard against the westward migration of [...] problems generated by Russia[...]“ (O'Brennan, 2007, p. 167) certainly still holds value. Furthermore, arguments promoting the benefits enlargement used in the past remain strong as there is abundant evidence of successful increases in prosperity amongst the countries that joined the EU in the 21st century (Beyer, Yi Li, & Weber, 2024). Moreover, while it may be easy to focus on democratic backsliding and illiberal democratic movements seen in the newer member states, enlargement has „contributed to closing the gap in democratic quality between the two halves of the continent“ and „to a lock-in of democratic reforms“ (Sedelmerier, 2014, p. 5). With arguments still largely in place, the main question becomes how they can be used productively to help advance enlargement today.

With the goal being the achievement of higher levels of support for enlargement, a couple of aspects need to be considered. First of all, selling enlargement to the general public is clearly necessary for enlargement to be successful, but it is not sufficient. One must remember that in many cases, particularly at the beginning of reinvigorated accession processes, EU leaders need to be targeted by actors aiming to securitise enlargement (like the EU Commission or other leaders already favouring enlargement). Indeed, „security concerns played a significant role in urging EU leaders to lessen their previous reluctance and to modify their strategies for enlargement“ (Higashino, 2004, p. 364) in previous rounds and can do so again. In some cases, this means convincing less active leaders to prioritise EU enlargement, while in other instances, a form of 'competition' with elites who are actively opposed to enlargement may be necessary. Another mistake to avoid is presenting security arguments as the only aspect pushing enlargement. Past communications by MEPs have, for instance, focused mainly on the positive effects of enlargement for the affected countries, with security only making up the second most frequent argument (Góra, 2021). This kind of communication does not stand in opposition to

securitisation but helps form a narrative on the many potential benefits of EU enlargement.

Recommendations

Based on the theoretical foundation and historical background presented, several recommendations can be made in order to tackle the issues plaguing EU enlargement communication:

- **Unifying messaging:** Ensuring less opposing communication from different elites would go a long way in presenting EU enlargement as a more organised and supported project. The suggestion is not to get all leaders on the same page; if that were to be possible, any other recommendation would be meaningless. Instead, actors who agree that enlargement is a goal worth pursuing should attempt not to directly contradict one another, as in the case between von der Leyen and Macron presented above. This will require a larger focus on informal strategy alignment in communication planning between elites. Actors opposed to EU enlargement are not going to stop spreading fear and even securitising against admitting new members. That is why it is important that messaging favouring enlargement works together to build a more unified pro-enlargement narrative.
- **Expanding security rhetoric:** While the war in Ukraine has positively influenced opinions on Ukraine's accession, this effect should be expanded to other countries, like the Western Balkan candidates. The Kosovan case, having helped the EU accession of countries far away from the conflict, shows that this is possible. Pointing to hybrid warfare in Ukraine and its usage in other candidate countries, for instance, could present one example of how aggression in Ukraine can lead to the recognition of security threats in other countries too (both inside and outside the EU).
- **Combining securitised issues:** Framing EU candidate countries as potential migration or economic threats could be counteracted by pushing enlargement as a solution to some of these issues. For example, enlargement clearly expands the EU's capacity to monitor and even influence migrant flows through a potential new member state (Papadimitriou & Phinnemore, 2008). This could be used to frame EU enlargement as a means of strengthening the Union's capabilities in migration management.
- **Using democratisation:** Having been used extensively during previous rounds of enlargement, portrayals of the process as a means to promote positive change in candidate countries is currently not present enough in communications. The Serbian student protests represent an example where the EU could have been significantly more vocal on how Serbia's accession to the EU was a strategic imperative to secure democracy and the respect for European values in the country.
- **Careful use of 'no exceptions' rhetoric:** Statements insisting that no exceptions can be made during accession procedures often directly oppose securitisation processes and must, thus, be used carefully. This recommendation comes with a very important disclaimer: the criteria set out for a country to be able to join the EU should not be weakened. So, while exceptions to accession criteria should not be made, the process still requires exceptional action from the EU. Such action has also already been seen, through expanded financial support to candidate countries like through the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (Directorate-General for Enlargement and the Eastern Neighbourhood, n.d.), for instance. Thus, it is important that communications reflect the exceptional action needed to achieve this important goal.

Conclusions

With the EU clearly pursuing a more ambitious enlargement policy since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, this paper set out to analyse how communication by EU elites could potentially help significantly advance EU enlargement. Securitisation, as understood within the Copenhagen School, was introduced and identified as a valuable tool to reach high levels of support for extraordinary measures in any successfully securitised policy field. The current problems identified included the perceptions of candidate countries as threats to the EU through migration, as well as to the member states' economies. The lack of a positive impact of the war in Ukraine on public perceptions of enlargement, as well as the absence of a unified message, were also highlighted. Furthermore, strong 'no exceptions' rhetoric is hampering the process of securitising EU enlargement.

Analysing past rounds of enlargement showed us how securitisation played a major role in the past and how issues, often similar to those we are seeing today, were overcome. The use of geopolitical arguments and clear securitising moves helped unify messaging on enlargement and move things forward. Developments in local crises pushed enlargement throughout the continent, showing how the war in Ukraine should have such an effect outside of Ukraine's direct neighbourhood as well.

The recommendations presented mostly have a similar goal: removing hindrances and promoting the process of securitising EU enlargement as necessary to ensure European security. Through a more extensive use of the many geopolitical crises facing Europe and careful avoidance of securitisation-hindering rhetoric, elites can present enlargement as a worthy goal, capable of bringing positive change both within the EU and across neighbouring countries. The present recommendations remain rather general, the reason for this lying partly in a lack of detailed studies into current enlargement securitisation.

This points us to one of the limitations of this paper, but, simultaneously, to significant potential for further studies. Having shown the relevance of security within the enlargement process, the relative lack in extensive studies on securitisation seen since the beginning of the war is surprising. This gap in literature prevents one from fully grasping the current state of affairs. Getting a better idea of existing processes of securitisation from February 2022 until today could help develop more precise suggestions and a better understanding of how the war in Ukraine has (or even has not) changed the EU's relationship with its neighbours.

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Enlargement in an Age of Fragmentation: The Limits of Unity and Cohesion

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Abstract

The European Union's (EU) long-standing enlargement agenda now represents a critical test of its unity. Enlargement in the past helped create peace, democracy, and economic growth in Europe, but today's atmosphere has turned the subject into a strain on economic and political affairs. Those opposing expansions lift the topics of national sovereignty, immigration, and extra bureaucracy as issues of concern, contributing to deeper divisions to the Union. These approaches view the EU's growth as something threatening rather than an opportunity.

This paper aims to analyse the division among the 27 member states, assessing how disunity affects internal governance and the European Union's political credibility. Effective policy making demands greater internal coherence. Without addressing its fragmentation — through institutional reforms, renewed political cohesion, and a reassertion of shared values — the European Union risks undermining unity, exposing the weaknesses of enlargement strategies, and questioning the continuity of the European project.

Keywords

Accession, Candidate Countries, Cohesion, Convergence, Copenhagen Criteria, Enlargement, European Unity, European Union, Euroscepticism, Fragmentation

Introduction

In recent years, the EU has witnessed increased internal fragmentation and divergences over political, economic, as well as ideological affairs among its member states. These divisions have posed significant challenges to the Union's foreign policy objectives, particularly its enlargement strategy. The EU has undergone several enlargement waves, each bringing new members into the Union. The expansion has introduced new challenges, including economic disparities and complex governance dynamics.

Simultaneously, the political climate has fueled the rise of far-right and Eurosceptic movements, which thrive

in an increasingly inward-looking and fragmented environment. Therefore, the EU outwardly promotes unity, meanwhile, the internal fragmentation leads to a multifaceted nature and impacts the willingness to pursue further enlargement.

The potential enlargement of six Western Balkans countries (WB6), as well as Türkiye, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, could result in a net annual cost of €26 billion for current member states (Euronews, 2024). Additionally, the Union faces significant changes on multiple fronts, including geographical shifts, as the accession of new countries will alter its borders. Currently, less developed regions within the EU – such as southern Spain, Italy, Portugal, Greece, and much of Eastern Europe – are considered 'transition regions' and are expected to receive reduced cohesion funding support due to the EU budget's shift toward supporting prospective new member states (Euronews, 2024). These pressures fuel growing concerns over the EU's future cohesion and international influence.

The Limits of Convergence

Internal fragmentation and divergences over political, economic, and ideological priorities among member states challenge shared prosperity within the EU. Today, these differences expose cracks in the unity and foundation. These tensions have implications for the EU's external agenda. Enlargement has been the cornerstone of the Union's foreign policy with the dual aim of fostering stability and extending democratic governance across Europe. This process fuels growing internal doubts, particularly due to competing national interests, calling for the European Union's ability to act collectively.

Since its establishment, the European Union has undergone a series of developments and improvements. The invented "convergence machine" was working to reduce inequalities inside the EU. "Europe invented a "convergence machine," taking in poor countries and helping them become high-income economies." (Gill & Raiser, 2012) The low-income countries become high-income while wealthier continue to develop. By joining the European Union, the governments are expected to adopt and effectively enforce the EU's rules – known as the *acquis* – meaning its national laws and practices must align with EU standards (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). As the EU prepares to welcome countries with significantly lower GDPs and weaker institutional frameworks, the demand for economic convergence becomes increasingly critical. However, economic integration has not always translated into political or social cohesion. It is possible for rising GDP to coexist with rising inequality, political and regional disparities. This calls into question the sustainability of the EU's growth model, which has been built on economic convergence, aiming to reduce regional disparities and help less developed countries catch up (World Bank, 2012).

The European Commission's 2023 and 2024 Enlargement Packages illustrate the EU's latest efforts to advance its expansion strategy. The 2023 Enlargement Package proposed accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and candidate status for Georgia, signaling a renewed commitment to expansion. The 2024 Package provided a detailed assessment of the states and the progress made by the Western Balkans, Türkiye, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia on their paths towards the European Union. Together, these packages

reflect a strategic recalibration of the EU's enlargement agenda in response to shifting geopolitical realities. Additionally, European enlargement serves the Union's geopolitical interest by promoting stability and fostering closer cooperation with neighbouring countries. Through enlargement, the EU extends its political, economic, and security influence, contributing to a more secure and prosperous continent.

As the European Parliament (2024) states: "whereas enlargement is ... a strategic geopolitical priority representing a geostrategic investment in the future, which will contribute to peace, stability, security, democracy, unity, the fight against climate change, as well as, ensuring prosperity and well-being on the European continent; ... whereas enlargement can be mutually beneficial for both existing and future Member States, and their citizens as long as the proper conditions and requirements are met."

Political Divergences: A Barrier to Cohesion

Yet, enlargement is increasingly controversial within the Union. Member states hold differing opinions on the accession of new members. The fear is that further expansion could dilute the Union's identity, strain its institutions, and increase economic disparities. Therefore, in times of such profound divergences, the question arises: Does the institutional machinery of the Union still operate as intended. The rise of far-right and Eurosceptic movements across Europe has capitalised on concerns over migration, undermining enlargement efforts and shifting focus toward nationalist agendas. The popularity of right and far-right parties is evolving, which questions the future of enlargement. These forces are reshaping Europe's political priorities within national governments and Brussels.

The emerging power of the far-right has affected the political sphere, especially as regards the EU enlargement agenda. The popularity of parties such as Austria (Freedom Party, FPÖ), France (National Rally, RN), Germany (Alternative for Germany, AfD), and the Netherlands (Party for Freedom, PVV) notably affect national and EU-level decisions, especially in a topic such opposing enlargement and push of the nationalist narratives (FEPS, 2025.). These changes reflect a broader reorientation of priorities away from deepening integration and enlargement, toward safeguarding national sovereignty and tightening border control.

Austria

Radical-right parties like the FPÖ (PFE) have taken a position of ambivalence, if not open opposition, to EU enlargement, capitalising on growing popular scepticism. Even during the 1990s, as Austria was negotiating its accession to the EU, the FPÖ began criticising the Union's bureaucracy and the perceived threat posed to national identity. Following the 2024 elections, party leader Herbert Kickl described their rise to power as the beginning of a "new era." The far-right Freedom Party recently achieved its best result. The party secured victory with the votes increasing from 16% to 29.2% (Euractiv, 2024). The party's success reflects a broader trend where Euroscepticism is increasingly tied to nationalistic narratives. By portraying EU enlargement as a threat to sovereignty, such parties mobilise voters who feel disconnected from Brussels.

Although the FPÖ has aligned itself with Russia, it opposes the EU sanctions imposed on Moscow due to its invasion of Ukraine. The allegations of financial support of Russian oligarchs' funding have been heard (Reuters, 2024). The longstanding critique of the EU has deepened the party's role as the sole defender of Austrian interests. Their rise to power may also contribute to the empowerment of similar far-right attempts in central and eastern Europe, strengthening a populist bloc, which increasingly speaks out against the influence of Brussels. The other far-right party, the Team HC Strache – Alliance for Austria (THC), is suspicious of the EU and expansion to Ukraine, as the party is against financing a collective EU debt to sustain Ukraine (FEPS, 2025, pg.8). Together, these parties reflect a trend of Euroscepticism within Austria's political landscape, with implications that may grow beyond its borders.

Despite this, Austria has always supported the EU's enlargement, particularly in the Western Balkans where it has established economic and political relations. In contrast, the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) has openly supported Austrian business interests in the region where Austrian Banks, Insurance companies, and firms have a strong presence. Under Sebastian Kurz's leadership, the party started moving more to the right and openly supported local autocrats. Additionally, among Austrian progressive parties, the Greens are not against the enlargement but have limited foreign policy interest. This divergence among Austria's main parties reveals a fragmented yet important national discourse on the future of EU enlargement.

Germany

Following the snap election, the newly formed government signed a 146-page coalition agreement titled "Responsibility for Germany" (Euronews, 2025), outlining its strategic priorities and policy directions for the coming term. After months of negotiations, representatives of the Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU), Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern (CSU), and Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) settled the agreement. The new federal government has defined numerous ambitious plans at national and European levels. The new German coalition agreement signals a pro-European stance, yet it reflects a strategic recalibration of Germany's role within the European Union. As Chancellor Merz declared, "the world is not waiting for us", which shows an acknowledgment of the urgency for the country to act more decisively on EU matters (Jacques Delors Centre, 2025).

The coalition has strong implications for EU enlargement, viewing the process as a geopolitical necessity, particularly when it comes to Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkans, meanwhile detaching itself from both Turkey and Georgia. Additionally, the German coalition agreement prohibits cooperation with the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which has intensified pressure on Germany's political landscape due to its recent electoral gains. The party came in second with 20.8% in the snap elections (DW, 2025), gradually gaining ground on public concerns about migration, national identity, and EU integration. The popular far right, the AfD, outrightly opposes enlargement, especially in countries that have Muslim majority populations or lower GDP. (FEPS, 2025)

The discussions regarding the future of the EU have tied in issues of cultural cohesion and social integration at the national level. Enlargement should be accompanied by internal reforms and a careful balance between the EU's ambitions for expansion and the institutions' absorption capacity. The position of Germany on important EU policies, such as enlargement, is now also determined not only by the conventional political or economic considerations but also by the domestic event of the rise of nationalist and populist forces, mirroring the situation in France.

France

France, as a founding member with the EU's second-largest economy, remains a key player despite internal political divisions. The ever-increasing tension between the traditional pro-European approach and the rising Eurosceptic feelings refer to a much wider problem of the EU itself. Despite its historical significance, the Franco-German "engine" of European integration plays a weaker role, especially in demanding times. France poses itself as having a "responsabilité particulière" in shaping the world order. Its approach to European integration, rooted in a preference for intergovernmentalism, reflects a desire to maintain the balance of U.S. dominance. However, Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine led France to prioritise supporting Eastern enlargement. As a result, the country had to review its priorities in European collective defense. The new threat made the French president see that Europe should respond more actively and consider eastern expansion as the EU's key to securing its stability. (FEPS, 2025)

The National Rally's (RN) and Macron's views on European integration and enlargement are clearly at odds. The RN believes the Union is currently putting too much effort into integration, and further enlargement would only add struggles, driven by a strong concern over potential challenges to France's national well-being. The RN argues the EU's enlargement could harm France's economic stability and risks undermining France's economy. Despite losing snap elections in France, the RN turned out to be the number one party in the first round having gained roughly 33% of the votes (Le Monde, 2024). These results indicate an increase in the public's support of the party's Eurosceptic and nationalistic program which is becoming more relevant to a share of the French voters. The good result of the RN reflects a shift in French politics with traditional parties losing their influence to populist movements. This trend could call into question France's adherence to the European Union and enlargement policies.

Netherlands

The parties in the Dutch 2024 coalition (VVD, NSC, BBB, and PVV) have a stance of a demanding attitude toward EU enlargement. In order to join the Union, the candidate country needs to meet the criteria. The two far-right parties, the Party of Freedom (PVV) with the Forum for Democracy (FvD), represent the longstanding concerns, especially in regard to migration. Their Eurosceptic approach can be seen in "Nexit", which appears not to be in favor of Brussels (Politico, 2023).

The idea of a Dutch exit from the Union is rooted in deep scepticism over EU affairs, including enlargement. According to the PVV, they reject the political union such as the EU, which, in their view, is *“an institution that pulling more and more power to itself.”* Their stance advocates for *“a sovereign Netherlands, a Netherlands that is in charge of its own currency, its own borders and makes its own rules”* (France24, 2023). While the PVV has softened its position by moving away from full exit, it remains critical, calling for reforms within the EU. Inside the coalition agreement is stated, that in case the EU proceeds with enlargement of Ukraine and Moldova, the country will reserve the right to *“restrict the free movement of persons within the EU if and insofar as expansion of the EU is discussed”* (Politico, 2024). The Dutch government maintains a critical stance on EU enlargement and new membership, emphasising that the process must be selective and that candidate countries must demonstrate full compliance with the accession requirements.

Enlargement is one of the biggest success stories of the EU in promoting the stability and prosperity of the continent. The long-regarded unifying project is today marked by a complex mix of opposition among major parties. The stances of key European parties on enlargement-related issues reveal how fragmented the political environment has become over most of the strategic issues. It highlights not only diverging views on which countries should join but also on how the EU should reform itself before admitting others.

Backing Enlargement, With Conditions

The European parties firmly believe that EU enlargement should remain an effective political tool, emphasising that the door must stay open to all European countries that can meet the Copenhagen criteria. These criteria were established by the European Council in 1993 to guarantee democracy, rule of law, human rights and protect minorities. The aspiring member states must meet the non-negotiable foundation of membership. All parties recognise that the integrity of the Union depends on maintaining standards. The European People's Party (EPP) advocates for a careful and thorough assessment of the implications of enlargement, a task led by its dedicated Working Group on Enlargement. The main principles of the selection are merit, respect for democratic institutions, the rule of law, and human rights protection. In their vision, the process should be based on the fulfillment of all accession criteria. As the EPP (2024) states: *“We stand by the EU’s accession promises and a forward-looking enlargement strategy for Ukraine, the Western Balkans, Moldova and Georgia. Every candidate country must also be ready for membership. We should take intermediate steps and closer cooperation in the meantime to put candidates in the best position to join.”* The decision to admit new members is a collective choice, affirming full membership only when candidates have demonstrably met the required standards.

A Divisive Step Toward Enlargement

Amending EU treaties is an essential step toward EU membership, but it remains a controversial issue among European political parties. Treaties define the structure of the EU, its authority, and how decisions are made. However, treaty reform remains a controversial matter. European parties' ideas on this critical issue differ: while the EPP is not transparent on treaty reform, the ECR Party opposes any change that could affect their national role. Controversely, European parties including PES, Renew, Greens, and The Left believe that amendments to treaties can strengthen the EU and improve its governance (Eunews, 2024). These parties believe that reforms are necessary to prepare the EU for future enlargement while preserving unity and uphold shared values.

"We want to reform the EU's treaties to make sure citizens feel better involved. We want to increase the efficiency, transparency and accountability of EU institutions – the gatherings where national ministers meet are too opaque." (Renew, 2024)

Frozen Talks, Fading Prospects: The Case of Turkey

Turkey remains a candidate country, but its accession process has effectively come to a standstill. Since 2018, the accession process has not been relaunched due to the country's geopolitical stance and the regression in democratic standards. A report adopted in May, supported by 367 MEPs, denounced human rights abuses and the crackdown on public protests (Euronews, 2025). The report states that Turkey remains a strategic partner, but at the same time, the shortcuts over key issues have huge importance. *"We call for an end to the Turkish occupation of Cyprus and the reunification of the country according to the UN resolutions and the European Union acquis."* (European Left, 2024) The EU's position remains cautious that the meaningful process in Turkey's accession will require substantial reforms, respect for human rights, and resolution of longstanding conflicts. Without which the process is unlikely to progress.

Türkiye's accession to the EU is an issue that the European parties take with caution. Most parties have been explicitly against membership such as EPP, PES, ECR, and the Left. As the PES (2024) notes: *"We regret that the EU accession process of Turkey has stalled for several years because of the Turkish government. In the absence of a drastic change of course, the accession process cannot be resumed in the current circumstances."*

Fragmented Support

The invasion of Ukraine has pushed the EU to reconsider Eastern enlargement due to its geopolitical importance. Regarding Ukraine and the Western Balkans (WB6), pro-European parties – including the EPP, PES, Renew, and the Greens – are supportive of their EU accession.

"Ukrainians are spilling their blood to defend our democratic freedom. Ukraine must join and it will join. But we need to be able to welcome it, like other candidates." (Renew, 2024)

In the vision of PES over the EU's enlargement, they welcome the start of membership negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and share the support for the European alignment of Georgia. The PES implementation of an effective enlargement policy, starting with the Western Balkans, should help all candidate countries to meet all criteria. However, ECR and the Left are more ambivalent towards the enlargement. The European Conservative and Reformist Party believes that the EU should consider further enlargement to strategically important countries, at the same time inside ECR's manifesto they state that: "we will categorically reject any automatic deepening of EU political integration as a direct result of enlargement," meaning that they do leave doors open but with cautious and according necessities.

To conclude, The division among European political parties reveals fragmentation within the EU, which is shaping the enlargement agenda in the long term. Future success will depend on reconciling these competing visions through clear and consistent conditionality and stronger strategic leadership. Moreover, to navigate in political realities and stay consistent, it is demanding to foster unity among diverse stakeholders and maintain credibility both within the Union and among prospective members.

Policy Recommendations

"United in diversity" has been the motto of the European Union since 2000. The words stand for different European country's unified effort to work together, meanwhile being enriched by their cultures, traditions, languages, etc. The disagreement can arise when 27 countries gather and make combined decisions, but later developments of the Union make it harder to stay united on strategic issues, leading to delayed responses on emerging geopolitical affairs. The clarification over united policies is being tested by political fragmentation, particularly towards the EU's external policy. The differing national priorities harden the efforts to maintain a cohesive approach. The lack of unity delays critical decisions, the accession of new members. The link between enlargement, its strategic purpose, and the geopolitical standpoint must be unified by European countries and parties.

Address Internal EU Fragmentation and the Need for Institutional Reforms

The European Union's external policy stands on expanding the Union's zone of stability, peace, and prosperity. Enlargement cannot succeed if pursued in parallel with deepening fragmentation among member states. The European countries have unequal economies and strong political differences between East and West, North and South, which leads the EU to face growing challenges to its cohesion. According to the Granada Declaration (2023), the leaders of the EU gathered to define the key priorities of the Union. *"Enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity. It is a driver for improving the economic and social conditions of European citizens, reducing disparities between countries, and must foster the values on which the Union is founded."* (European Council, 2023).

The enlargement process is significantly hindered when internal EU dynamics are in need of unified decisions. The pressure increases as internal problems threaten the urgency of collective action. Rising nationalist and populist groups are fueling internal disagreements, public scepticism, and weakening unity. The reinforcement of collaboration and partnership is crucial, creating a strengthened dialogue and action to address shared cohesion policies.

As the EU is set to see its membership grow to include many new countries, the stress on its institutional model is rising. Currently, the systems for decision-making are not well-adapted to handling a larger, more diverse Union. Without action, enlargement may increase existing obstacles, including problems passing laws, differing law applications, and growing public disappointment in how the EU is run. The EU must be able to respond clearly and decisively to problems on the world scene, such as geopolitical events and challenges.

Strengthen Communication Strategies with Candidate Countries

Understanding among EU members and future members is very important to the success of EU expansion. Turkey can be a case of how a lack of clear communication and language can cause difficulty while settling cooperation. Despite Joint Communication on the state of play of EU-Türkiye political, economic, and trade relations are advancing, the EU has serious concerns about fundamental rights and the rule of law. *“Türkiye did not reverse the negative trend of continued deterioration of democratic standards noted in the past years.”* (European Commission, 2024). To manage expectations accordingly, the EU should present its communication in a way that considers the social, political, and historical aspects. It is important for communication to address these concerns.

One of the forms of cooperation is addressing realistic prospects, expectations, and demands for membership.

The EU carries the responsibility to prepare the candidate countries to achieve the accession criteria.

The EU has shown an interest in financial assistance and reform support and *“the EU will continue to provide substantial financial assistance to partners under the Instrument for Pre- Accession (IPA) and the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe (NDICI – Global Europe), as well as technical assistance, in particular through Twinning and TAIEX.”* (Council of the European Union, 2024).

But the ambitions should be matched with reality. The European leaders should explain and demonstrate, through evidence, that EU expansion does not harm people’s jobs, homes, or cultures. Growth and stability can not be brought in times of fragmentation. The strategy of the EU should be unified, to settle the straightforward partnerships and communications. The EU’s worldwide impact and the Union’s ability to resist threats raise scepticism and harm the belief in the accession processes.

Boost Inclusivity in Enlargement Discourse

To ensure that the EU’s enlargement is transparent and inclusive the need for involvement of civil society is demanding. The diverse groups from the EU and candidate countries are the bridge of collaboration and shared

effort. The enlargement of the EU has to involve both formal and non-formal negotiations with the involvement of many groups of people. All forms of civil society, youth groups, educational institutions, and local governments should be as involved in guiding the future of the EU as the official institutions and governments. Regular consultations and dialogues with civil society organisations (CSOs) and youth groups can ensure the enlargement process to fit local demands, promote democracy, and respond to the social conditions. By allowing local voices the process of accession is becoming less remote and more actionable, helping to ensure accountability for change among those in power (European Movement International, 2024). Having clear, consistent messaging benefits potential EU membership as it counteracts misinformation and disinformation. Involving citizens in public consultations, and forming relationships with non-EU representatives boosts transparency and makes the public more informed about joining the EU.

Concluding Marks: A Union in Question

The debate on EU enlargement has grown increasingly complex in recent years, reflecting broader shifts in the European Union's political, social, and geopolitical landscape. The enlargement has now become inextricably linked to domestic political and ideological differences. The future of EU enlargement is a defining test of the Union's identity, cohesion, and long-term vision. As internal fragmentation grows and political parties struggle to present a coherent approach, questions are raised on how the EU should balance national sovereignty with deeper integration, and how it manages diversity without losing unity.

Political fragmentation within the EU represents varying national interests, governance styles, and policy priorities. The internal conflicts undermine the EU's unified stance on core values, complicating consensus on enlargement decisions. Most political parties share a lack of a clear vision over the enlargement process and EU's capacity to act as a geopolitical actor.

There is a proliferation of sceptical, outright resisting positions held by a rising number of political actors, especially from far-right currents, on the prospects of further expansion. These parties regularly claim enlargement as a threat to national sovereignty, social cohesion, and economic stability. However, at the same time, mainstream political forces maintain the recognition of the strategic necessity of enlargement, particularly taking into consideration the war waged by Russia on Ukraine, as well as in general, the demand for a secure, democratic, and prosperous European neighbourhood. A Union in question is a Union in crisis - where choices made today will shape the kind of European Union that endures tomorrow.

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Reinvigorating EU Enlargement

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Abstract

The European Union (EU), founded on ideals of peace, democracy, and shared prosperity, continues to pursue enlargement as a strategic tool for regional stability and influence. In response to rising geopolitical tensions particularly Russia's aggression and regional insecurity the EU has extended candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This shift in the EU's approach to its Eastern neighbours reflects changing geopolitical realities and emphasizes the importance of solidarity. It also highlights the careful process required to ensure that candidate countries receive the necessary support to fully align with shared European values before attaining membership. The process of enlargement raises important questions about the EU's institutional capacity, political cohesion, and adherence to core principles. As the Union grows more diverse, decision-making processes may become slower, unity could become strained, and enforcement of democratic standards may face inconsistencies. Granting candidate status to countries still undergoing democratic or judicial reforms, such as Georgia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, illustrates the delicate balance between strategic geopolitical interests and maintaining the integrity of EU values.

This policy brief explores whether the EU can integrate these candidate countries without compromising its

core values or institutional efficiency. It considers how phased integration, strict reform conditions, and reinforced border controls could offer a structured path forward. Ultimately, successful enlargement must preserve the Union's unity, strengthen its global role, and support long-term peace and prosperity in Europe.

Keywords

EU enlargement, candidate countries, accession process, geopolitical tensions, institutional capacity, democratic reforms, conditionality, rule of law, phased integration, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Introduction

The European Union (EU) stands firmly on the principles of peace, democracy, and collective well-being, driving continuous expansion to strengthen political unity and economic integration across Europe.

Enlargement remains a core pillar of the EU's development, as outlined in Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union. This provision allows any European country that respects and promotes the Union's values- including human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and human rights-to apply for membership (European Union, 2012). The enlargement process is both a legal obligation and a political commitment, underscoring the EU's dedication to a rules-based international order.

The 2023 Enlargement Package released by the European Commission reignited momentum for further enlargement. It recommends opening accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and granting candidate status to Georgia (European Commission, 2023). These recommendations reflect a strategic reorientation toward Eastern Europe in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics. While the EU aims to act as a stabilizing force, these efforts bring institutional and policy challenges that must be addressed to ensure enlargement remains credible, coherent, and sustainable.

Problem Description & Background

Background

The European Union's renewed commitment to enlargement, as reflected in the current Enlargement Package (European Commission, 2023), is grounded in a broader historical and strategic rationale that extends beyond immediate political interests. From its inception, the EU was conceived as a peace project designed to achieve stability through interdependence, rather than through isolated expressions of national independence. By fostering economic, legal, and political integration, the Union sought to bind European nations into a rules-based community rooted in democracy, prosperity, and mutual accountability. In the current geopolitical context marked particularly by Russia's aggression against Ukraine- this founding vision has acquired renewed urgency. Enlargement is no longer merely a vehicle for economic convergence; it has become a strategic necessity aimed at reinforcing security, energy resilience, and democratic stability throughout the continent. While countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and those in the Western Balkans are each sovereign and unique in their trajectories, they are already closely interlinked with the EU through trade, migration, and security frameworks. The role of the European Commission in this process is essential, as it ensures the legitimacy, consistency, and merit-based nature of accession by monitoring compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria and alignment with the *acquis communautaire*-the body of common rights and obligations. Enlargement thus stands as both a geopolitical imperative and a reaffirmation of the EU's founding aspiration: to build a united, democratic, and peaceful Europe through shared responsibility and collective progress.

What's New: The 2023 Enlargement Package

In November 2023, the European Commission published the "Enlargement Package," representing one of the most consequential steps towards EU expansion after a lengthy period of limited enlargement. This initiative emerges

amidst profound geopolitical upheavals, chiefly driven by Russia's military aggression in Ukraine, which has significantly destabilised Eastern Europe and underscored the urgency for a unified and resilient European response (European Commission, 2023a). The Enlargement Package thus serves not only as a mechanism for political and economic integration but as a strategic instrument to reinforce regional security and promote long-term stability. The candidate countries, namely Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, have maintained long standing bilateral relations with the EU, including association agreements and trade partnerships, aimed at gradual alignment with European norms and values. Nonetheless, these states face persistent internal challenges, such as democratic reforms and territorial conflicts, compounded by external geopolitical pressures, particularly from Russia (Council of the European Union, 2023). By foregrounding enlargement in 2023, the EU signals its solidarity and commitment to stabilising its Eastern neighbourhood, promoting peace through interdependence rather than acts of unilateral independence. This approach acknowledges the delicate balance between strategic geopolitical interests and the imperative to uphold EU principles, while preparing the Union institutionally and politically for the complexities of enlargement within a rapidly changing security environment (Youngs, 2022; European Commission, 2023b).

Key Proposals:

- Initiate formal accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina to advance their integration into the European Union. This step should be guided by clear benchmarks on rule of law, democratic governance, and economic alignment, ensuring that progress is both measurable and reversible based on compliance.

Officially grant EU candidate status to Georgia, thereby recognising its strategic importance and reform efforts. This designation would enable Georgia to begin the structured pre-accession process, contingent upon meeting core political and institutional criteria in line with EU standards.

Problem Description:1**EU enlargement can strain institutional stability and slow down decision-making processes.**

As more Member States join, the growing diversity of political voices not only reflects the EU's democratic legitimacy but also underscores the continued appeal of its values (Schimmelfennig, 2021). However, this diversity also increases the complexity of consensus-building in the Council of the EU and the European Council, particularly under qualified majority voting rules. Divergent economic priorities and political interests between new and existing members can lead to protracted negotiations and fragmented outcomes (Fabbrini, 2022). The enlargement also strains institutional structures, as seen in the expanding size of the European Parliament and the growing number of Commissioners, which may reduce responsiveness and clarity in governance (European Parliament, 2023).

To accommodate an expanded Union, several institutional reforms are necessary:

1.Reducing the Size of the College of Commissioners

Article 17(5) TEU allows the European Council, with Parliament's consent, to reduce the number of Commissioners to two-thirds of the number of Member States. This reform would enable a rotation system that maintains fairness while improving coordination and portfolio coherence within the Commission (TEU, 2016, art. 17(5)).

2,Extending Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) to Sensitive Areas

To overcome veto deadlocks in areas like taxation and foreign policy, QMV could be extended using the "passerelle clause" (TEU, 2016, art. 48(7)), requiring unanimous approval by the European Council and national parliaments. This would enable faster, more unified EU action in key strategic areas.

3,Recalibrating Voting Weights in the Council

As the EU grows, the current QMV thresholds may need adjustment to better reflect the Union's demographic and economic balance. Recalibrating voting weights can ensure that representation remains fair and that both large and small Member States retain meaningful influence.

4,Treaty Revisions to Clarify Competences and Streamline Procedures

Ambiguities in the division of competences between the EU and Member States can lead to inefficiencies. Targeted treaty amendments could clarify responsibilities, simplify legislative processes, and enhance institutional coherence-especially important in a larger Union.

5,Enhancing the Role of the European Parliament

Strengthening the European Parliament's legislative and oversight capacities would reinforce the EU's democratic legitimacy. Expanding co-decision procedures, boosting budgetary authority, and increasing scrutiny over the Commission would give EU citizens a stronger voice in Union governance.

Together, these reforms would enhance the EU's capacity to act decisively, maintain democratic integrity, and uphold institutional balance in the context of future enlargements.

Problem Description:2

Schengen's expansion will create pressure on EU border security, customs, and immigration control, in particular if it includes countries like Ukraine, Moldova, or the Western Balkans.

This can be understood through multiple dimensions:

1. Operational dimension: Schengen enlargement shifts pressure to the EU's external frontiers, requiring high-performance surveillance and advanced border management systems in newly integrated states (European Commission, 2023). A possible measure could involve the EU prioritising targeted funding and technical assistance to candidate countries to upgrade border infrastructure and implement advanced surveillance technologies prior to accession.

2. Security dimension: Countries with limited infrastructure or institutional capacity may become vulnerable entry points, increasing the risk of smuggling, irregular migration, and customs fraud (Frontex, 2023). To strengthen cooperation between candidate countries and EU security agencies, joint risk analysis should be enhanced and rapid response teams established to promptly address emerging threats.

3. Legal and institutional dimension: The integration of new members may strain EU-wide frameworks such as the Common European Asylum System and the Dublin Regulation, testing the consistency and resilience of EU migration governance (Guild & Carrera, 2022). Reforming and harmonizing asylum policies across Member States and candidate countries is essential to ensure coherent implementation, alongside investing in capacity building for asylum and immigration authorities can be a smarter approach.

4. Economic dimension: New Schengen entrants may require substantial financial investment to meet border control standards, creating disparities in burden-sharing and raising questions about funding and resource allocation within the EU. The strategic approach would be establishing clear, equitable funding mechanisms that combine EU budget support and national contributions, with transparency and accountability to ensure efficient use of resources.

5. Political dimension: Schengen expansion can trigger domestic debates in both existing and candidate countries, influencing public opinion, electoral dynamics, and political will all of which can affect the pace and success of enlargement. It is advisable to promote inclusive public dialogue and awareness campaigns in both existing and candidate countries to build support for Schengen integration and address misinformation. To preserve the Union's internal security and cohesion, Schengen accession for candidate countries such as Georgia, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Ukraine should be granted only after strict regulatory and political reforms are implemented. This would safeguard the solidarity and trust of existing Member States while ensuring that new entrants are fully prepared to manage EU border responsibilities.

Clarifying the Link Between EU Membership and Schengen Accession

While this analysis focuses on the potential impacts of Schengen expansion, it is important to clarify that EU

membership does not automatically entail Schengen accession. Schengen integration follows a distinct legal and technical process, requiring compliance with strict criteria on border control, visa policy, and data protection. Therefore, the pressures discussed above are conditional on future Schengen inclusion, not a guaranteed outcome of EU enlargement.

Problem Description:3

Granting Georgia EU candidate status could risk stretching EU values if democratic reforms are not fully implemented.

While Georgia has made significant strides in EU-aligned governance—such as implementing anti-corruption legislation, reforming public administration, and enhancing electoral transparency (European Commission, 2023)—serious democratic shortcomings remain. These include persistent concerns over judicial independence, with allegations of politicised court rulings and a lack of accountability in judicial appointments. In recent years, the government has also faced criticism for efforts to restrict media freedom and limit civil society space, including legislation perceived as undermining non-governmental organisations (Freedom House, 2023). The EU has repeatedly stressed that accession is conditional upon respect for democratic principles and the rule of law. However, Georgia's recent trajectory—marked by anti-liberal tendencies and backsliding on key reforms—raises concerns about whether it meets the Union's core political criteria (Youngs, 2022). This dilemma is further complicated by internal contradictions within the EU itself, where member states such as Hungary and Poland have been accused of undermining democratic checks and balances (Kelemen, R. D. (2020)). These cases underscore the importance of maintaining credible and consistent benchmarks for candidate countries. A recommended course of action to preserve the EU's normative authority and institutional coherence, any progress towards Georgia's accession should remain firmly tied to clear, measurable reform conditions, particularly in the areas of judicial reform, media independence, and anti-corruption efforts.

Problem Description:4

The expansion of the EU increases the risk of divided national interests, particularly between Eastern and Western Europe.

As the Union grows, political, economic, and social differences between member states become more pronounced, especially between countries with historically different political systems and economic structures (Kornai, 2021). These divergences complicate consensus-building within the European Council and hinder decision-making on critical issues such as economic reforms, security, and foreign policy (Vachudova, 2023). Consequently, the EU's ability to present a united front may be compromised, potentially slowing its response to external challenges.

Key Examples Highlighting East-West Divisions in the EU:***1.Fiscal Policy Divergences:***

Hungary and Poland resisted the EU's rule-of-law conditionality mechanism tied to budget disbursements. In 2021, both countries threatened to veto the €750 billion COVID-19 recovery fund unless conditions were softened, delaying approval and exposing deep governance tensions (European Council, 2021). To address fiscal policy divergences, the EU should strengthen conditionality mechanisms linking funding to adherence to democratic and rule-of-law standards while promoting constructive dialogue to ease tensions and build mutual understanding.

2,Migration Policy Differences:

During the 2015 migration crisis, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia rejected the EU refugee relocation quotas. Hungary constructed border fences and passed strict anti-immigration laws, contrasting with Western countries like Germany and Sweden that accepted large numbers of asylum seekers (Trauner & Neelsen, 2017). To manage migration policy differences, the EU needs to develop a unified yet flexible migration framework that respects national sovereignty while ensuring solidarity and equitable burden-sharing among Member States.

3,External Relations Divergence:

Hungary has pursued close ties with Russia and China, sometimes blocking EU statements on sanctions or human rights, such as vetoing a 2021 EU statement criticizing China's actions in Hong Kong. It was also slow to support sanctions against Russia following the invasion of Ukraine, challenging the coherence of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (Visegráds Insight, 2023).

To overcome external relations divergences, enhanced coordination and enforcement within the Common Foreign and Security Policy are essential to guarantee timely, coherent actions and encourage member states to align their foreign policies with EU strategic objectives.

These examples underscore how divergent political priorities and strategic orientations between Eastern and Western member states can strain EU cohesion. As enlargement brings in states with varying historical experiences, economic models, and geopolitical alignments, the risk of fragmented policy responses becomes more pronounced. Such internal divisions not only challenge the EU's decision-making efficiency but also threaten its ability to maintain a consistent and unified stance on key issues, thereby validating concerns about the complications that arise from an expanded Union.

Problem Description:5

EU enlargement will require adjustments to budget and resource allocation to accommodate new member states.

EU enlargement will require adjustments to budget and resource allocation to accommodate new member states. As more countries join—particularly those with lower GDPs or less developed economies—the Union may need to increase its financial support through structural funds and cohesion programmes (European Commission, 2023). Existing Member States with stronger economies, especially those in Western and Northern Europe, are expected to provide greater financial contributions to the EU budget, while new and less economically developed members will receive a larger share of EU funds aimed at supporting infrastructure, economic development, and reform (European Parliament, 2023). The redistribution of funds may lead to tensions, as wealthier countries may resist increased contributions, while newer members will continue to seek substantial financial assistance for modernisation (Begg, 2022).

Concrete examples highlight these dynamics:

•Post-2004 enlargement funding: After the accession of ten primarily Eastern European countries in 2004, cohesion funding surged. For instance, Poland received more than €80 billion between 2007 and 2013 for infrastructure, regional development, and institutional strengthening, making it the largest recipient of EU funds during that period (European Court of Auditors, 2015).

•2021–2027 MFF negotiations: The Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021–2027 revealed sharp divisions within the EU. The “Frugal Four”—Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden—opposed higher net contributions and demanded stricter controls on EU spending. Their resistance underscored growing unease among wealthier states about disproportionate fiscal responsibilities (Emmanouilidis & Zuleeg, 2020).

These developments underscore the financial and political complexities of accommodating economic disparities through enlargement. They also suggest that reforms to the EU’s budgetary mechanisms may be essential to maintain fairness, efficiency, and cohesion as the Union expands.

Policy Options & Recommendations

1. Phased Integration: A Realistic Pathway for Transitional States

Phased integration offers a flexible and strategic approach to EU enlargement by allowing candidate countries to gradually adopt EU standards and participate in selected EU programmes before attaining full membership. This tailored method accounts for varying levels of political readiness and institutional development among candidate states.

Ukraine: Amid ongoing conflict and large-scale reforms, Ukraine has made notable strides in aligning its infrastructure and regulatory frameworks with the EU. For instance, it has been synchronised with the European electricity grid (ENTSO-E, 2023) and is deepening integration in areas such as customs cooperation and digital

transformation. This staged approach supports institutional resilience without rushing formal accession.

Moldova: Moldova is leveraging its candidate status to integrate incrementally into EU markets, especially in the energy and transport sectors. With support from EU technical assistance, Moldova has reduced dependency on Russian energy and is advancing anti-corruption and judicial reforms (European Commission, 2023). Gradual participation in the EU Single Market would incentivise deeper reforms.

Georgia: Recently granted candidate status, Georgia faces challenges related to political polarisation and judicial independence. Phased integration through partial participation in EU initiatives such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, and the Eastern Partnership offers both incentives and oversight for democratic reform (European Parliament, 2024).

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Due to a fragmented constitutional system and persistent ethnic divisions, Bosnia and Herzegovina lags in implementing EU-aligned governance. A phased pathway involving targeted pre-accession funding, civil service reform support, and gradual access to EU trade mechanisms would help address systemic governance issues (Blockmans & Russack, 2022).

By implementing phased integration tailored to the reform capacities of each country, the EU can uphold its standards while maintaining momentum for enlargement. This approach can be further enhanced through pilot trade movements, whereby candidate countries participate in selected, low-risk trade corridors or EU customs initiatives. Such pilot programmes—monitored through EU-aligned digital platforms and limited to specific sectors—can promote economic independence and regulatory alignment in a controlled manner. Crucially, this ensures that existing member states trade policies and security interests remain safeguarded, while simultaneously incentivising deeper structural reforms in candidate states.

2. Strict Reform Conditionality: Country-wise Assessment and Strategic Application

Maintaining strict conditionality focused on democratic norms, rule of law, and human rights remains essential to safeguarding the EU's core values. Conditionality must go beyond formal legal alignment and instead involve concrete reform benchmarks, independent monitoring, and reversible mechanisms if democratic backsliding occurs. The EU's credibility depends on applying consistent scrutiny to both current and prospective members.

Georgia

Challenges: While Georgia has implemented several governance reforms—such as electoral law changes and anti-corruption legislation—concerns remain over the politicisation of the judiciary, erosion of media freedom, and attempts to curb civil society (European Commission, 2023).

Recommendation: The EU should tie financial and technical support (e.g. IPA III assistance) to verified progress on judicial reform and press freedom. Independent assessments by EU institutions or third-party organisations must be used to ensure that reforms are substantive and not superficial.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Challenges: The country faces institutional paralysis, with power-sharing arrangements that have perpetuated ethnonationalist deadlock, impeding judicial reform, anti-corruption efforts, and electoral improvements (Blockmans & Russack, 2022).

Recommendation: Conditionality must be embedded in ethnically neutral governance standards, such as civil service professionalisation and judicial transparency. EU funds and pre-accession support should be delivered in phased tranches, dependent on verifiable steps toward breaking the institutional gridlock.

Ukraine

Challenges: Ukraine has demonstrated strong political will for reform but faces continued challenges with high-level corruption, judicial independence, and rule-of-law enforcement, particularly at the regional level (OECD, 2023).

Recommendation: EU support should be performance-based, prioritising integrity vetting for judges, civil society empowerment, and decentralisation reforms. Similar to Hungary's case, partial withholding of funds could be used if benchmarks are missed, providing leverage without halting progress entirely.

Moldova

Challenges: Moldova is a frontrunner in reform but remains vulnerable to Russian influence, political instability, and the influence of oligarchic networks—powerful groups that control key economic and political resources, often undermining democratic institutions and transparency (Freedom House, 2023). These networks occasionally disrupt democratic consolidation by promoting vested interests over the public good.

Recommendation: The EU should support Moldova's reform momentum by deepening sectoral integration (e.g. energy and transport), while ensuring that anti-oligarchic measures—targeting these entrenched power groups—alongside judicial vetting and media pluralism remain preconditions for receiving full access to EU programmes.

3. .Strengthening Border Defence and Security Infrastructure

As the EU considers enlargement, particularly with countries located on its eastern and southeastern borders, the question of external border security becomes increasingly critical. Candidate countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are geographically situated near areas of heightened geopolitical tension, active conflict, or major irregular migration routes. Integrating such states into the EU, especially the Schengen Area, would shift the Union's external frontier to more volatile zones. This necessitates pre-accession investments in border surveillance, migration management, and alignment with EU-wide security systems such as Frontex, the Schengen Information System (SIS), and Eurodac. Strengthening infrastructure not only safeguards EU citizens but also ensures that future Member States are integrated into the Union's broader defence and crisis-response architecture from the outset.

Ukraine

As a country at war, Ukraine's future accession to the EU—particularly the Schengen Area—would shift the Union's

external border to an active conflict zone. This raises unprecedented security and logistical challenges. Robust investments in modern surveillance infrastructure, biometric entry/exit systems, and the deployment of trained border guards would be essential. Cooperation with Frontex, the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency, must be scaled up, and interoperability with databases like SIS and Eurodac must be ensured (Frontex, 2023). These efforts will help Ukraine meet the standards for Schengen integration while reinforcing EU border integrity.

Moldova

Moldova faces growing threats from transnational criminal networks, irregular migration, and hybrid risks stemming from Russian influence. Border infrastructure modernisation-especially along the eastern frontier-is essential to counter smuggling and security vulnerabilities. The EU should expand cooperation on border security and intelligence-sharing, while also investing in dual-use infrastructure (e.g., roads and digital systems) that enhances both trade connectivity and defence readiness.

Western Balkan States (e.g., Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia)

These countries are situated along key migration routes and face challenges in managing irregular flows and organised crime. Enhanced border management support through Frontex liaison officers, shared training programmes, and improved asylum-processing capacities will be vital. EU co-financing should be directed toward integrating these states into the Strategic Compass framework and improving civil-military coordination mechanisms (European External Action Service, 2022).

Real-Time Measures and Strategic Alignment

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU has already initiated joint procurement of defence equipment and upgraded its Strategic Compass for military mobility and cyber defence. These initiatives should be extended to candidate countries to improve their resilience and embed them within the EU's broader security ecosystem.

Conclusion

Careful and strategic enlargement of the European Union is vital for ensuring long-term political stability and sustainable economic growth. The four countries currently seeking EU membership -Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia- present both significant challenges and strategic opportunities. For each, integration into the EU requires tailored approaches based on their domestic political contexts and regional dynamics.

Ukraine

Ukraine's accession pathway should be guided by a phased integration model, accompanied by strict reform benchmarks and reinforced by targeted investments in border security. Progress in key areas such as judicial reform, anti-corruption, and governance must be supported by a gradual alignment with EU standards, while ensuring that the country contributes to the Union's broader security and stability objectives (European Commission, 2023; Youngs, 2022; Baker, 2022).

Moldova

Moldova has made notable progress in meeting EU criteria. However, its accession depends on further strengthening of democratic governance and judicial independence (European Commission, 2023). Continued anti-corruption efforts and economic stabilization are critical. Additionally, improved border management and regional cooperation will be necessary due to its proximity to Russia and the ongoing Transnistrian conflict (European Parliament, 2023).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The country's EU accession process should adopt a phased integration strategy that enables gradual institutional alignment while applying strict reform conditions focused on constitutional restructuring, governance efficiency, and the rule of law. Given its internal ethnic divisions and administrative fragmentation, consistent progress in institutional cohesion is essential. Additionally, EU support should prioritise investments in border infrastructure and internal security to ensure that Bosnia and Herzegovina can effectively manage future responsibilities as part of the Union's external frontier (European Commission, 2023; Council of the European Union, 2023).

Georgia

Georgia's EU accession should follow a phased integration approach, anchored in strict reform conditions and reinforced by enhanced investment in border security. Priority should be given to advancing anti-corruption reforms, strengthening economic resilience, and improving governance structures. Given the country's strategic location and tense relationship with Russia, effective border management and alignment with EU security objectives will be essential for its gradual integration into the Union (European Commission, 2023; European Parliament, 2023). Across all four countries, phased integration should serve as a practical pathway toward full membership, allowing for gradual alignment with EU norms. Strict reform conditions, focused on democratic governance, rule of law, and economic stability, must remain non-negotiable. Moreover, targeted investments in border security-especially for countries with external EU borders-are necessary to safeguard the Union's integrity. By adhering to these principles, the EU can expand responsibly while preserving its core values and ensuring institutional resilience.

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Europe and Threats for Globalization

Valeria Sciore

Special Entry: European Policy Prize Winner

Abstract

This paper seeks to answer to the question “What policy tools can the EU leverage to ensure that individual member states respect the EU values, including democracy, the rule of law, and diversity?” by discussing the current toolbox EU has at its disposal and proposing an original, and more effective, mechanism to help the European Union to face violations to its fundamental values. Relying on EU documents, official journals and books, the analysis will take into account the effectiveness of some tools the EU used in the past and discuss how to improve them. Considering the past and its implications, this paper will provide future possible behaviours to better face the threats in regards to the respect of EU core values.

Keywords

EU legal framework,
democratic backsliding,
EU fundamental values, prevention
and sanction, Rule of Law.

European legal framework’s uniqueness

The EU legal framework is a sui generis legal space of interconnected bodies and institutions, working nationally and supranationally to ensure the compliance of Member States constitutions within the articles of the Treaties; this is possible thanks to a linkage of overlapping bodies that supervise EU unique legal space. Therefore, the legal system of the Union relies on coexisting interconnections: between legal systems of the Member States, between Member States and EU, between EU, Member States and the bodies for protection of Human Rights and between member states belonging asymmetrically to different systems. It is thus a legal space in which the comparison between legal systems dominates and, consequently, harmonization and unification are encouraged (Ragone, S. 2021).

How to become a Member State

To become a Member State of EU, a country must conform to the criteria imposed by the Union, i.e. Copenhagen Criteria, and respect some values considered essential by EU institutions.

In particular, there are some fundamental values a Member State must respect which are grouped under three categories: Democracy, Fundamental Rights and Rule of Law (European Union, 2012, Article 2 TEU). The crucial aspect of these is that if one of these values isn't respected, then consequently all the three are violated, i.e. if a State abuses Rule of Law, it starts inevitably a backsliding towards an illiberal regime (so also democracy isn't respected anymore) and in such a regime it is not possible to guarantee the respect of fundamental human rights (Sieps, 2023, pp. 90). Particularly, the respect of Rule of Law, represents an elementary aspect for the Union: mutual trust between Member States, a functional internal market and EU reputation and status, and so the attraction of foreign capitals, are rooted in it (EUR- Lex, n.d.).

Backslidings towards autocracies: the case studies of Poland and Hungary

Even though it has been made clear by the Treaties that the values mentioned above are fundamental to be respected by a Member State, since the violation of one of them would go against the EU standards of accession, in the last years some illiberal regimes have been established in the territories of Member States (i.e. Hungary and Poland, which backslidings started respectively in 2010 and 2015).

To face these two situations, the Union effectively applied financial punishments and, only in Hungary, it applied the Conditionality Regulation, e.g. the freezing of EU funds. These monetary mechanisms were more effective than all the tools the ECJ tried the previous years, e.g. the recommendation from the Venice Commission to Poland (Venice Commission, 2016) or the Rule of Law Framework, which were too "soft" and only obtained "cosmetic" changes in the abusive regimes.

However, all the financial mechanisms have been applied too late, when the illiberal regimes already were entrenched in the two countries: the monetary punishment against Poland was applied in 2021 and the Conditionality Regulation was applied only in 2022, twelve years later Orban's victory at the elections (Sieps, 2023, pp. 41-45).

Complications with EU cautious reaction

The main "problem" that EU had to face during the backsliding was actually its behaviour; its policy of prevention instead of action stopped the Union from reacting resolutely against the violations: a decade of recommendations and dialogues between EU and the abusing states allowed both Poland and Hungary to continue violating Rule of Law by establishing autocracies, without any concrete forthcoming punishment against them (Pech, L. 2021. Pp. 318-338) (Sieps, 2023, pp. 39).

Moreover, the Union could not react aggressively, risking illegal moves that would violate the deeply worshipped principle of Peace. For the Union was thus deeply difficult to react to such a circumstance, in fact both Member States maintained a “façade of legality”, acting constitutionally to achieve their immoral and undemocratic goals (Sieps, 2023, pp. 74).

What if domestic law doesn't comply anymore with EU standards?

Even if it seems contradictory, acting constitutionally vis à vis the domestic law does not always imply the compliance with EU legal framework and standards, as it is possible to see in the case of Hungary. After winning 2010 elections, Viktor Orban made the Parliament enact the Fundamental Laws (which didn't consider at all transparency nor human rights) and then a Fourth Amendment which, constitutionally, annulled all the Constitutional Court rulings previous to 2011's Fundamental Laws. All previous decisions were thus no longer considered. This not only weakened the system of check and balance, but most of all allowed Orban to hint at the possibility of re- introduce Death Penalty (G. Halmai, 2020, pp. 205-207).

Now, Death Penalty is against the Copenhagen Criteria, which sets the standards to become a Member State of the EU. This implies that the abolition of Death Penalty is a fundamental requirement to enter in the Union and it must be absent in the domestic constitutions of a state that aspire joining EU; such is not only quoted in the Copenhagen Criteria, but also in Article 2 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of European Union. Hence, Death Penalty is completely against the EU and what its values and standards are.

Accordingly, it is clear how Hungary deeply violated EU legality in its core values and in what it represents with this assertion. Clearly, the European Union should have instantly solved the situation; however, due to the above-mentioned reasoning, the EU legal framework, a solution was not easy to be found. Moreover, the EU also had another main obstacle to face inside its legal framework: the lack of an expulsion mechanism to eventually be triggered against a Member State.

The “Nuclear Weapon”

The only existing sanctioning mechanism against violations of Art. 2 TEU is Article 7 TEU, the so-called “Nuclear Weapon” by President Barroso. This mechanism was thought of as an impactful sanction to react to eventual breaches to the core values, since it implies the “suspension of some rights, including the voting rights of representative of the government of that Member State in the Council” (European Union, 2012, Article 7 TEU, para 3). However, article 7 TEU was not designed to be actually applied. It seemed to be a significant way to stop the backsliding and eventual violations, but it is to be seen as based on prevention rather than punishment. Therefore, the sanctioning part of the article is quite impossible to be applied because of unanimity.

Article 7 TEU: preventive or sanctioning?

In particular, art. 7(1) TEU can be easily triggered as it only requires consent of the European Parliament (majority of 2/3 votes) and the approval of the majority of 4/5 of the Council (22 of 27 votes). However, art. 7(1) TEU is only a warning method: it is triggered.

By contrast, article 7(2) TEU empowers the European Council, acting by unanimity, to determine whether the violation is serious and persistent. Finally, article 7(3) TEU empowers the Council of EU, acting by a qualified majority, to suspend some rights of the Member State (even the right to vote in the Council). Clearly, in order to trigger article 7(3) TEU and the concrete punishment, there is the need to activate before art. 7(2) TEU but, since it needs unanimity, it becomes really difficult to obtain such (e.g. neither Poland nor Hungary voted against each other when the EU tried to trigger article 7 TEU, they mutually protected each other). Another important point to be taken into consideration is that all definitions written in article 7 TEU are more theoretical and do not give a concrete way of acting against an abuse of the values; this surely created many complications regarding how the Union should have proceeded. In short, the absence of an expulsion mechanism and the impracticality of the sanctioning one, thus the problem within the need of unanimity, along with the hesitating behaviour adopted by the Union, were all factors because of which the EU could not promptly manage the circumstance. Such a way of acting constitutes a global risk to EU credibility. Therefore, there is the need to find a new *modus operandi* to boost effective outcomes. Especially, in a reality in which many illiberal regimes are settling around the world, the Union could have the necessity to face new emerging autocracies, influenced by the Polish and Hungarian example.

An original proposal to deal with the problem

Analysing how the Union reacted to the Polish and Hungarian democratic crises, this paper presents a proposal that would fill the current gaps in EU legal toolbox, fitting within EU principles. The answer to the inefficient sanctioning mechanism is to establish a new one, which must have some peculiar features that would make its triggering effective. Firstly, institutional enforcement should be introduced, with a new body, a neutral Court, whose aim would be to judge eventual violations of the criteria and values. Its sanctions would obviously be based on proportionality, including the possibility of expelling a Member State if it does not align anymore EU in what it defends and represents. It would obviously require a formal revision of the Treaties to be added, but, since the reform needs all the 27 countries to agree, a more an enhanced comparison that would allow the establishment of such a mechanism should be considered. This solution could need some financial incentives to convince reluctant countries to agree with it, i.e. a soft power's strategy of economic pressure.

Viktor Orban's try of reintroduction of the Death Penalty goes against all the values of the EU; it doesn't consider human rights nor democracy or Rule of Law, moreover it explicitly ignores the Criteria. How can a country be a Member State of the European Union if it does not consider the required standards to enter in it anymore? For this reason, through the new institution, the EU could finally protect itself from illiberal forces that try to establish inside

it and to escape from its control.

Another key aspect to take into consideration is unanimity. Article 7 TEU could not completely be triggered because of the need for unanimity; thus, a new body should be considered, composed by one representative per state, acting by a majority of three fourths. Such would respect each country's needs and will but would also simplify the application of the mechanism, if necessary. Even if, at a first glance, this mechanism might go against the EU principle of integration, it actually enhances other EU vital principles: the membership of EU is not unconditional; a member state must show its constant commitment to democracy, otherwise it would not respect what EU embodies.

This institution would remain silent until a clear abuse is acknowledged, so it would be complementary to article 7(1) TEU, but more effective than 7(2) TEU. In this way the EU could continue focusing on prevention and on promoting rule of law with its toolbox, and at the same time, be sure that, if needed, a mechanism of protection can enter into action and defend the values. Nonetheless, the EU could even decide to not use it very frequently, in order to have it at its disposal as a warning against those states that intend to violate the values.

Possible arguments against the new Court

Obviously, many arguments against this new institution might arise, as they had been made for the Conditionality Regulation (Progin-Theuerkauf, S. and Berger, M. 2022). For this reason, Poland and Hungary's arguments against the Conditionality Regulation and the ECJ answers have been thoroughly analysed, in order to consider eventual complaints against this proposal and disprove them.

First of all, any argument about legal basis would be rejected because the proposed institutional change is completely under EU competence, since it would encourage the consideration of the values of article 2 TEU whose respect is required, under article 49 TEU, for accessing in the EU. Moreover, the accusation of absence of legal basis cannot be raised in this case, since the earlier-discussed proposal is not a financial tool, as the Conditionality Regulation, but rather a completely new judiciary body.

Then, it would be impossible to argue about the circumvention of article 7 TEU, since the new court would be complementary to it. It would be a more effective mechanism added to the already existing article. And, once more, it is the competence of the EU to assure compliance with the standards with all mechanisms under legality. An eventual argument about the compatibility with article 4(2) TEU, and, therefore, the protection of national identity, can easily be rejected, as the vote in the new court would be based on a three fourths majority, and not a qualified one (that would empower countries with a bigger population size). Finally, the abstraction concerning Rule of Law and its definition is not arguable, considering that the ECJ has already clarified that it is not possible to list all the prohibitions and implications of Rule of Law and there is nothing such as an obligation to explicitly list them. Furthermore, even though the Rule of Law is an abstract concept, democracy and Fundamental Rights are not. They are quoted in documents such as article 2, article 10 (Democracy) and the Charter (Fundamental Rights) and as I argued before the three of them are interconnected.

It is undoubted that such an institution would be perceived by Member States as a loss of their sovereignty, but such would be necessary to guarantee a common democratic space that considers everyone's rights. Furthermore, EU member states voluntarily accepted EU principles before joining the Union, so they should not be against such an institution, whose aim is to further guarantee their defense. Finally, the ideal answer the EU should reply to whatever complaint should be that, since the new court would aim to safeguard the Union and its status from the illiberal threat, it should be easily accepted by each Member State. In fact, this mechanism would preserve EU values and priorities, and there is no reason a Member State should be against that.

In conclusion, the proposal of an objective court to evaluate eventual breaches of the values and consequently react in proportion to the gravity of the abuse, is an innovative strategy to bypass the complications concerning the unanimity and the trigger of article 7 TEU, representing a solution the EU should take in consideration to act more resolutely. Furthermore, this proposal also cannot be easily argued: it represents a procedure EU needs to react without losing its credibility.

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