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# Making the enlargement momentum work – the case for timelines

**Towards a more strategic enlargement policy amid new geopolitical realities**

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*With a renewed enlargement momentum in the EU following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, debates have evolved on how the process can be accelerated without allowing for concessions on reforms. This dilemma specifically affects the so-called Western Balkan countries which have been stuck in the EU's waiting room for more than 20 years. As roadmaps for enlargement and parallel internal reforms are slowly taking shape, some member states and experts suggest corresponding timelines both for the EU and candidate countries to make the process more tangible and renew the accession promise in the face of waning trust among the Western Balkans and vast challenges facing the new candidates in the East. While no panacea, introducing enlargement schedules can help push member states to a more strategic enlargement policy in the face of a new geopolitical reality.*

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## Introduction

The 2004 enlargement of the European Union towards ten new member states was widely hailed as the ‘reunification of Europe’<sup>1</sup>, making the bloc both bigger and stronger.<sup>2</sup> Just one year before, at the Thessaloniki Summit, the same opportunity had been extended to the countries of former Yugoslavia and Albania, now usually referred to as the ‘Western Balkans’. While Slovenia was already part of the 2004 enlargement, only Croatia has managed to gain full membership in the 20 years since, however. After a decade of stagnation, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent bids for EU membership by Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia brought enlargement back on the EU agenda, creating new momentum<sup>3</sup> and closing of ranks among member states.

The discrepancy between the speedy process for Ukraine and Moldova, both of which have formally opened accession negotiations in June 2024, and the ‘old’ candidates in the Western Balkans has been stark. While Montenegro’s new government is seizing the momentum and pushes for accession by 2028,<sup>4</sup> Albania and North Macedonia have long been stuck over bilateral disputes with EU member states, Serbia’s government continues to embrace autocracy and Russian-friendly rhetoric, Kosovo’s membership application is ignored since 2022 over alleged non-compliance of the government with its obligations in the Dialogue with Serbia, and a divided Bosnia-Herzegovina continuously fails to meet the conditions to open accession talks.

In short, despite a new geopolitical reality increasing the urgency of EU enlargement, not enough has changed in terms of the dynamics and obstacles to accelerate the process. The fact that Turkey’s protracted bid for membership has still not been officially revoked casts additional doubt on member states’ determination. Georgia’s prospects have meanwhile been put on hold by both the EU and the increasingly authoritarian Russia-friendly governing party Georgian Dream.

Apart from reforms in the candidate states, another precondition for enlargement is the readiness of the EU itself to admit new members. Discussions<sup>5</sup> on pre-enlargement reforms have recently started, but appetite for reviewing the Treaties varies widely among European leaders and parties. Causing a stir,<sup>6</sup> then-European Council President Charles Michel in August 2023 suggested 2030 as the date for the EU to be ready to admit new members, which was promptly rejected in many EU capitals. The fierce insistence not to provide concrete timelines is usually accompanied by an emphasis on the strict conditionality determining accession dates – not the other way around.

<sup>1</sup> European Council, “2004 Enlargement: Facts and Figures,” accessed December 17, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/2004-enlargement-facts-and-figures/>.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimír Špidla, “The Union’s Identity is Shared Sovereignty,” *FEPS Progressive Post*, May 3, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Lippert, *Ukraine’s Membership Bid Puts Pressure on the European Union*, SWP Comment 2022/C 21 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, March 24, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Government of Montenegro, “Montenegro to Become 28th EU Member by 2028,” February 16, 2024, <https://www.gov.me/en/article/prime-minister-spajic-addresses-european-policy-centre-montenegro-to-become-28th-eu-member-by-2028>.

<sup>5</sup> European Western Balkans, “MEPs Debate Commission’s Document on Pre-Enlargement Reforms, Disagree over Veto Rights,” April 25, 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/04/25/meps-debate-commissions-document-on-pre-enlargement-reforms-disagree-over-veto-rights/>.

<sup>6</sup> Greogorio Sorgi, “Commission Snubs Charles Michel’s 2030 EU Enlargement Target,” *Politico*, August 29, 2023.

In contrast, several analysts<sup>7</sup> insist that only by providing a tentative schedule both for internal reforms and enlargement can the current dynamics be changed and create urgency warranted by the new geopolitical threats. These demands often come with suggestions to alter the accession process itself, such as dividing it into different stages or improving the EU's capacity to act against spoilers. In the meantime, seven EU member states – the self-declared 'Friends of the Western Balkans' group of Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, and Slovenia – joined the demand for 'a clear agenda and timetable' in a letter to EU Chief Diplomat Kaja Kallas and Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos.<sup>8</sup> Tying together some of the loose ends in the ongoing discussions, this working paper therefore looks at advantages and downsides of timelines in EU enlargement.

## Expectation management

In November 2023, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock held a high-level 'Conference on Europe' to reaffirm the necessity for EU enlargement.<sup>9</sup> Despite this support, the current German government reject timelines, stating concerns over citizens' expectations concrete dates would raise. Arguably, this could put the EU on the defensive, either forcing it into concessions despite inadequate reforms in the candidate states, or see it being used as a scapegoat by governments unwilling to reform. And even if all goes according to plan, there is no guarantee that all member states – some of which need the consent of their citizens through referenda, most notably France – will back the final accession.

Actually however, all of these fears have already materialized in the current accession process *without* timelines: In March 2024, EU leaders agreed to open accession negotiations with Bosnia-Herzegovina as a political signal, although most conditions had not been met.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, political elites in Belgrade, Tirana, and beyond are notorious for covering up the lack of initiative by accusing the EU of bias against them, with little to no reprisal from the EU and member states. Indeed, observers regularly criticize inconsequential communication by EU institutions and representatives as a root cause of the dynamics in the Western Balkans, where even minimal progress in the accession process is usually highlighted and backsliding rarely addressed.<sup>11</sup> A striking example is the EU's opposing reactions to the two candidate countries most affected by autocratisation – Georgia and Serbia – hinting at the continued disjunct strategies towards the two regions

On this account, the fears are clearly warranted – but they point at a larger problem within the current process itself. Unequal approaches to the different candidate countries often spurred by ulterior motives of individual governments have long exposed the

<sup>7</sup> e.g., Jelena Džankić et. al., "Enlargement on Hold: The Price Europe Pays," (ELIAMEP, July 1, 2024), accessed December 17, 2024, <https://www.eliamep.gr/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Enlargement-on-Hold-The-Price-Europe-Pays.pdf>; Marek Dabrowski and Luca Léry Moffat, "The Changing Dynamics of the Western Balkans on the Road to European Union Membership: An Update," *Bruegel Policy Brief* (Bruegel, July 22, 2024).

<sup>8</sup> Alexandra Brzozowski, "EU Should Intensify Engagement with Western Balkans, Seven Member States Urge," *EURACTIV*, December 16, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> German Federal Foreign Office, "Conference on Europe in Berlin: For a Larger and Stronger Europe," November 2, 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/europe/conference-on-europe/2629188>.

<sup>10</sup> Berta López Domènech, "The European Council Greenlights Opening Accession Talks with Bosnia and Herzegovina," *EPC Flash Analysis* (European Policy Centre, March 22, 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Corina Stratulat, "EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans – Three Observations," *European Policy Centre Commentary* (European Policy Centre, November 8, 2021), <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/EU-enlargement-to-the-Western-Balkans-Three-observations~4392d4>.

weakness of the EU as a foreign actor even in its most successful policy field.<sup>12</sup> With an increased number of members, the methodology is now hindered by 27 potential vetoes. What was possible for an EU at the height of its (transformative) power in 2004 now seems far-fetched for a union operating in perpetual crisis mode and lacking a common strategic vision. What is more, it is precisely the experience of the ‘big bang’ enlargement of 2004 which reinforces the view of the sceptics that concrete target dates are not the right instrument for a merit-based enlargement policy.

## Painful precedents?

Those leaders sceptical of timelines – and usually of enlargement more generally – quote the last enlargement rounds as examples of rushed accessions, where reforms slowed down after joining the EU,<sup>13</sup> and democratic backsliding especially in the cases of Hungary and Poland. The promise of ‘reuniting Europe’ had been cheap while the Iron Curtain divided the continent, and once it was down, politicians found it impossible to backtrack – a phenomenon Swiss political scientist Frank Schimmelfennig calls “rhetorical entrapment”.<sup>14</sup> Yet today, its power has faded and there is hardly a case for another ‘big bang’ enlargement. Not least are the obstacles for the current candidate states much higher and diverse than those faced during prior accessions, on the one hand given recent and ongoing conflicts and territorial disputes, and on the other learnings from previous enlargement rounds that have added significantly to the EU *acquis communautaire*.

As the example of Hungary demonstrates, the EU’s legal toolbox currently does not provide protection against democratic backsliding in any EU member state, highlighting a need to further strengthen the rule of law throughout the EU and its member states in preparation for future enlargement.<sup>15</sup> The 2020 enlargement reform has put the *fundamentals first* in the technical process,<sup>16</sup> which could be extended to all EU policy decisions and communication towards the candidate countries. This could help in proving to citizens that the EU is serious about enlargement and can deliver on the transformations needed for societies to prosper. As suggested in the **2024-2029 Strategic Agenda**,<sup>17</sup> this will mean making use of existing and developing new instruments to protect the rule of law in the incipient legislative period.

Looking back at the preparations for the 2004 and subsequent enlargements, we can see that concrete target dates for accession were only given late in the process and still further adjusted. At the same time, time horizons were indispensable for the EU’s mid- and long-term planning, as well as for structuring the process in a credible and predictable

<sup>12</sup> Isabelle Ioannides, “EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans: Where There Is a Will, There Is a Way,” *Europe’s Futures* (Institute for Human Sciences, July 4, 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Antoaneta L. Dimitrova, “Speeding up or Slowing down? Lessons from the Last Enlargement on the Dynamics of Enlargement-Driven Reform,” *South European Society and Politics*, 16, no. 2 (June 21, 2011): 221–233, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13608746.2011.577939>.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Schimmelfennig, “Conclusion: The Double Puzzle of Eastern Enlargement,” in *The EU, NATO and the Integration of Europe: Rules and Rhetoric. Themes in European Governance*, ed. Frank Schimmelfennig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 190–192.

<sup>15</sup> Olivier Costa et al. *Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Report of the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform (Paris-Berlin, September 18, 2023).

<sup>16</sup> European Commission, “2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy,” October 6, 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0660>.

<sup>17</sup> European Council, “Strategic Agenda 2024-2029,” accessed December 17, 2024, [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/yxrc05pz/sn02167en24\\_web.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/yxrc05pz/sn02167en24_web.pdf).

way without necessarily accelerating it.<sup>18</sup> With its **Agenda 2000**, the EU had set itself a clear target date for internal policy reviews in preparation for enlargement,<sup>19</sup> and by developing biannual roadmaps matching the changing Council presidencies, the Commission encouraged self-discipline as well as ownership by the respective member states. Crucially, working with target hypotheses was indispensable for budget and policy planning, and thus for the very functioning of the EU as it prepared for widening.

When seen from this perspective, the 2004 and later enlargements bear numerous lessons showcasing the strength of a united EU in developing differentiated tools and roadmaps tailored to the specific needs of candidate countries to preserve its interests while advancing states that are not yet fully ready. Nor do difficult precedents provide a dead-end argument against setting dates, but caution against one-size-fits-all approaches and schedules. Instead, policies should be developed or adjusted according to the changed reality, while leaving room for manoeuvre. And time indeed is of essence here, as preconditions for reforms deteriorate on the ground.

## The Human Factor

The scale of the task to join the EU is steadily growing as new legislation enters into force and with it the need of aspirant countries to harmonize their institutions with the so-called Copenhagen criteria, including the *acquis communautaire*.<sup>20</sup> This is carried out by countless politicians, civil servants, and civil society actors from local administrations to EU institutions. As such, it requires vast institutional capacities on all levels and portfolios, from fisheries to fiscal policies. History has shown that a tangible perspective to join the EU can in fact create a momentum to mobilize the necessary capacities and political will to introduce heavy reforms – its famous ‘transformative power’.<sup>21</sup> However, as the perspective fades, so does the spirit of those driving the process behind the scenes. Unsurprisingly, when key actors necessary to implement these changes lose faith, they become more susceptible to other temptations, including corruption and emigration.

In Ukraine and Moldova, broad reform efforts were triggered by the prospect of EU accession, but with the difficult negotiations just starting, the process is likely to face hurdles, and frustration is looming on the horizon.<sup>22</sup> In the Western Balkans meanwhile, brain drain has become a key factor inhibiting development. Apart from losing capacity and institutional memory, the result is a social apathy exacerbated by dwindling numbers of possible actors of change crucial for reforms that can ultimately only come from within. Consequently, non-democratic governance faces less resistance, which in turn keeps societies even further away from EU integration. Does this crucial – i.e., human – factor warrant a tangible time horizon to create a strong reform momentum?

<sup>18</sup> Graham Avery, “Uses of Time in the EU’s Enlargement Process,” *The EU Timescape*, (Routledge, 2013), 77–90.

<sup>19</sup> European Union, “Agenda 2000: For a Stronger and Wider Union,” July 15, 1997, <http://aei.pitt.edu/3137/1/3137.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> European Union, “Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria),” accessed December 17, 2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html>.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Heather Grabbe, *The EU’s transformative power: Europeanization through conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Susan Stewart, *Ukraine during the Russian War of Aggression. The Nexus between Internal Developments and EU Accession*, SWP Research Paper 2024/RP 13 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, September 6, 2024).

Looking at the current candidate states, the answer seems to be ‘yes, but’. Long-term frontrunner Montenegro clearly uses its self-set goal of joining the EU by 2028 to make the most of the current momentum and push its administration to full proficiency.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Albanian prime minister Edi Rama upon opening the first negotiation chapter on 15 October 2024 set the target date for accession to 2030. At the same time, setting a schedule alone will hardly undo state capture and polarization, or overcome the constitutional deadlock faced by Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet, when setting a time horizon, the EU forces its institutions to develop suitable mechanisms to address these challenges for the benefit of current and future citizens, as well as its own global power.

To strengthen the democratic legitimacy of the process and ensure its success, it is indispensable to bring member states’ societies on board as well, some of whom will directly decide on any future accession through national referenda. As reflected in the mission statements of the new Commissioners and recently reiterated by Director-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations Gert-Jan Koopman,<sup>24</sup> this requires enhanced, frank communication to explain the rationale of EU enlargement and offer means for participation in EU and candidate countries. To achieve this, strong leadership and political courage is needed, both in Brussels and other EU capitals where despite the alleged urgency, the will to compromise is still often lacking. Given low levels of support for the EU in many member states, this can also be an opportunity to involve citizens in the upcoming changes at an early stage, increasing understanding and support.

## The Enlargement-Reform-Nexus

Although not formally linked, internal reform has historically gone hand in hand with enlargement, ensuring the functionality of a widened Union. Ever since enlargement has returned to the EU’s agenda, the Commission has explicitly stated that it must also serve as a ‘catalyst for progress’ and calls for pre-enlargement policy reviews.<sup>25</sup> In addition, accession treaties complementing existing legislation are a central moment for adjustments. With currently ten (potential) candidate states, warnings are being raised especially in Western member states that decision-making under the current status quo will be severely hampered. However, there is no consensus on the *type* of changes necessary before a new round of enlargement, with positions ranging all the way from “the Lisbon Treaty is ‘enlargement proof’”<sup>26</sup> to predicting the Union’s death without reform<sup>27</sup>.

At the same time, even though there has been official consensus on enlargement as such since the 2023 Grenada Declaration<sup>28</sup>, views on how, how fast, and who (first) continue to

<sup>23</sup> Milan Nič et al., “Montenegro’s EU Push: Imminent Opportunities and Challenges,” *DGAP Memo* (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik, March 05, 2024).

<sup>24</sup> “Enlargement Package 2024: Expectations and the Way Forward”, event livestream, October 31, 2024, by European Policy Centre, YouTube, 1:09:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYNiszGvZeA>.

<sup>25</sup> “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on Pre-Enlargement Reforms and Policy Reviews”, March 20, 2024, [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/926b3cb2-f027-40b6-ac7b-2c198a164c94\\_en?filename=COM\\_2024\\_146\\_1\\_EN.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/926b3cb2-f027-40b6-ac7b-2c198a164c94_en?filename=COM_2024_146_1_EN.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Government Offices of Sweden, “Speech by Minister for EU Affairs Jessika Roswall,” (Dublin, Ireland, November 24, 2023), <https://www.government.se/speeches/2023/11/speech-by-minister-for-eu-affairs-jessika-roswall/>.

<sup>27</sup> Élysée, “Europe Speech,” (April 25, 2024), <https://www.elysee.fr/front/pdf/elysee-module-22625-en.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> European Council, “The Granada Declaration,” <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/06/granada-declaration/>.

differ widely. A study<sup>29</sup> conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) at the end of 2023 spans all 27 member states and highlights this lack of agreement. The authors come to the conclusion that a sense of urgency warranted by the new geopolitical reality should be induced by adopting timelines for both enlargement and internal reform to move from crisis management and ad hoc decisions into strategic planning, as well as mitigating fears in candidate states that enlargement will be halted until consensus is found on internal reforms.

Finally, the call for internal reforms also affects the enlargement methodology, which to many is unequipped to deal with the new reality.<sup>30</sup> Earlier this year, Germany and Slovenia presented a non-paper promoting the extension of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV)<sup>31</sup> in enlargement to strengthen efficiency and credibility.<sup>32</sup> Learning especially from the case of North Macedonia, the aim is to tone down politicization of the technical process whilst expediting the geopolitical rationale. Simultaneously, the proposal is seen as a first step towards more QMV in foreign policy more generally, increasing the EU's capacity to act and preventing blackmail from non-aligned leaders as recently displayed by Hungary's Victor Orbán.<sup>33</sup> As of yet, no consensus is emerging.

## A geostrategic shift?

Currently, these debates are still in early stages and often overshadowed in urgency by the ongoing war against Ukraine and escalations in the Middle East. At the same time, an idea that has been floated by think tankers for several years is gaining new traction, finding its way into both the 2024-2029 EU Strategic Agenda and Council Conclusions: **'gradual integration** between the European Union and the [Western Balkans] region during the enlargement process.'<sup>34</sup>

While Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia are fairly advanced in their EU alignment in key (economic) policies through bilateral Deep and Comprehensive Trade Areas (DCFTAs), originally devised as an alternative to EU accession, the Western Balkans for the most part lag behind. As membership and its rewards became increasingly elusive, the EU's transformative leverage has largely faded. *Gradual approaches* are thus aimed to bring enlargement 'back on track.'<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Piotr Buras and Engjellushe Morina, "Catch-27: The Contradictory Thinking about Enlargement in the EU," *Policy Brief* (European Council on Foreign Relations, November 23, 2023).

<sup>30</sup> Theresia Töglhofer, "EU Enlargement – A Will But Not (Yet) a Way," *DGAP Online Commentary* (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik, June 30, 2022).

<sup>31</sup> Wouter Zweers et al., "Unblocking Decision-Making in EU Enlargement. Qualified Majority Voting as a Way Forward?," *Policy Brief* (Clingendael, June 2024).

<sup>32</sup> Republic of Slovenia, "Minister Fajon: 'We Will Strengthen the Slovenian-German Strategic Partnership,'" *Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs*, December 5, 2023, <https://www.gov.si/en/news/2023-12-05-minister-fajon-we-will-strengthen-the-slovenian-german-strategic-partnership/>.

<sup>33</sup> Dalibor Rohac, "Orbán's Blackmail is Outrageous – But the EU Must be Smart," *Politico*, January 22, 2024.

<sup>34</sup> European Council, "European Council Meeting (23 and 24 June 2022) – Conclusions" (Brussels: General Secretariat of the Council, June 24, 2022), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/57442/2022-06-2324-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Schmidt and Vedran Dzihic, "Europe Must Seize this Opportunity to Enlarge – and Reform", *Balkan Insight*, October 17, 2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/10/17/europe-must-seize-this-opportunity-to-enlarge-and-reform/>.



Different ideas have emerged on how to advance political association and economic integration as far as possible before formal accession, allowing for quicker, tangible rewards for concrete reforms.<sup>36</sup> A prominent template is *staged accession*, providing ‘a predictable way forward for all present and future membership candidates in parallel with internal reforms aimed at smooth functioning of an enlarged EU.’<sup>37</sup> Five phases from a pre-stage to full-fledged membership are envisioned to better prepare both the candidate states and the EU for eventual enlargement.

Other suggestions include *transitional integration*,<sup>38</sup> a structured path of gradual integration to keep up reform momentum and rewards in the candidate countries while ensuring clear EU conditionality. Similar to staged accession, the concept foresees increased pre-accession funds and participation in specific policy fields, but in contrast is seen as an addition to the current methodology rather than its replacement. Finally, *differentiated integration*<sup>39</sup> is seen by some as a way to phase-in new members in particular policy fields in line with tested EU enlargement instruments, by ways of their accession treaties excluding states from specific sensitive areas or continuing monitoring until they are ready. However, the experts warn<sup>40</sup> that a more ambitious revision of the treaties should be given preference to differentiation, fostering the link between comprehensive internal reform and enlargement to strengthen the EU at its core.

If the goal is to make ‘geopolitical enlargement’<sup>41</sup> real, speeding up accession while regaining credibility and ensuring strict conditionality, **a clear strategy is needed**. Drawing both from EU internal debates and expert recommendations, overall agreement emerges that a revision of the treaties must go in parallel with enlargement, while new instruments should modify the process itself to allow for a more gradual integration, ultimately leading to full membership. Given the current lack of strategic consensus however, it seems to be an insurmountable challenge.

And yet, a new instrument has been devised to showcase the EU’s ambitions towards gradual integration: the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (2024-2027).<sup>42</sup> Based on the Next Generation EU scheme highlighting fundamental freedoms,<sup>43</sup> the plan includes clear roadmaps – and timelines! – as well as tangible rewards for actual reforms which will be distributed upon biannual assessment. In case of failure to comply, the money can be given to states that fared better.

Running until 2027, it will end together with the current Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). If the EU is indeed serious about enlargement, the next MFF will have to

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Lippert, *EU Enlargement: Geopolitics Meets Integration Policy*, SWP Comment 2024/C 01 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, November 1, 2024), doi:10.18449/2024C01.

<sup>37</sup> Milena Mihajlović et al., “Template 2.0 for Staged Accession to the EU,” *Policy Paper*, (CEPS, August 28, 2023), <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/template-2-0-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/>.

<sup>38</sup> Ilke Toygür and Nicolai von Ondarza, “European Family Action Plan. Mapping Transitional Integration While Moving Towards EU Membership,” *GPC Policy Brief* (IE University, April 2024).

<sup>39</sup> Barbara Lippert, “The Nexus Between Enlargement and Differentiation,” *Policy Paper* (Istituto Affari Internazionali, January 2017), [https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/eu60\\_2.pdf](https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/eu60_2.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> Costa et al., “Sailing on High Seas”.

<sup>41</sup> Lippert, “EU Enlargement: Geopolitics Meets Integration Policy”.

<sup>42</sup> European Commission, “New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans,” European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), November 8, 2023, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/new-growth-plan-western-balkans\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/new-growth-plan-western-balkans_en).

<sup>43</sup> “Recovery and Resilience Facility,” NextGenerationEU, n.d., [https://next-generation-eu.europa.eu/recovery-and-resilience-facility\\_en](https://next-generation-eu.europa.eu/recovery-and-resilience-facility_en).

mirror this ambition.<sup>44</sup> While the Growth Plan is only an addition to a vast number of existing funds and policies aiming at increasing the Western Balkans' EU rapprochement, it can serve as a test case offering valuable lessons to activate the often-evoked 'new dynamics' to the process and help to streamline the currently somewhat disjunct approaches to the Western Balkans and the Eastern Trio.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Every momentum has an expiration date. The EU Commission must make sure to use the current consensus among member states to move from crisis management to strategic planning in the enlargement process. While no methodology can replace political will, an inclusive process to devise individual schedules for each country and policy area is key to mobilizing societies while creating impetus and a sense of urgency among current members to tackle internal reforms, as well as ownership in the enlargement process and the overcoming of bilateral blockages.

Such a strategic sea change would require compromises by all current member states, a strong political and societal will in candidate and EU countries, as well as vast human, administrative, and financial resources. The EU will need to use its entire toolbox – and possibly extend it – to meet the unprecedented challenges of integrating new members amidst an ongoing war, territorial divisions, unresolved conflicts and corresponding trauma, as well as political, societal, and demographic challenges after a decade of enlargement fatigue. Ideally, this process should be **concluded within the legislative period 2024-2029 and mirrored in the next MFF**.

Rather than attempting another 'big bang' enlargement, the variety of candidates warrants an individual approach that overcomes bureaucratic simplifications such as the 'Western Balkans' label, and require instruments to address particular challenges of post-conflict reconstruction, reconciliation, and ethno-territorial divisions. Crucially, an overhaul of the EU's neighbourhood and enlargement policy should also include an honest assessment of a country's qualification to engage in the accession process, and the development of alternative approaches to those who presently lack it – most notably Turkey – without closing the door to membership indefinitely.

Dividing the process into stages could allow for quicker awards and participation in specific policy areas, serving both EU interests and reviving reform impetus in candidate states without requiring treaty changes. Agreeing on specific steps within corresponding timelines can help reinstate trust in the process and mobilize actors of change, countering and even reversing some brain drain. The **Growth Plan can serve as a pre-stage** to make sure only countries truly committed to reforms move into the accession process, ending the dilemma of rewarding minimal progress while increasing pressure on governments failing to meet the requirements. The recently started negotiations with Albania provide a perfect opportunity to launch this new approach.

The final ingredient to this new strategy is clear and honest communication that explains the process to citizens of candidate and member states alike, as well as giving them a voice in it. Including a wide range of civil society in the devising of roadmaps and making it part of the reform assessments can increase predictability and democratic legitimacy, as does clear sanctioning of backsliding among candidate governments. Ideally, this will be

<sup>44</sup> "The EU budget needs extensive reform both to resolve longstanding shortcomings and in anticipation of a further enlargement of the Union", see: Iain Begg, "Dilemmas and Challenges around the EU Budget," *Insight* (CEPS, April 8, 2024).

part of a comprehensive package boosting the rule of law, fundamental freedoms, and participation across all EU policies.

The EU can no longer afford to operate without a strategic vision to protect its interests amidst a deteriorating international order. The incoming European Commission is tasked to set the course for the EU to become a truly geopolitical – and geostrategic – actor amid a volatile global order. Leadership both from the institutions and member states will be vital to create the cohesion necessary for this endeavour, and a fruitful environment for a mutually reinforcing widening and deepening of the Union. Based on the present analysis, we can conclude that setting roadmaps with tangible steps, target dates, and interim assessments streamlined with the EU's overall political calendar can serve as a critical instrument in the toolbox towards writing this new chapter of EU history as an ever-closer and stronger Union of more than 30 European states.

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