

**GPC POLICY BRIEF**

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# ENLARGEMENT: SECURING EUROPE IN TIMES OF WAR

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*More than two years since the start of Russia's aggressive assault on Ukraine, there has been a notable shift in the European Union's stance on enlargement. Despite initial hesitations from many member states, including the strong reservations expressed by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the European Council of December 2023 endorsed the European Commission's recommendations to begin accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and to recognise the candidate status of Georgia. The EU's increased prioritisation of enlargement has also accelerated the process with the six Western Balkan countries, notably the start of accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina.*

*These decisions, unthinkable just three years ago, represent a landmark change in European integration. This paper analyses the factors driving this change, argues that the next enlargement is unlikely to be quick and easy, and considers the EU policy priorities – in the security, defence, and foreign policy areas – that most urgently require reform.*

## INTRODUCTION: THE RENEWAL OF THE COMMITMENT TO ENLARGEMENT

The brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the subsequent realisation among EU leaders that President Putin [envisions a restored Imperial Russia](#) has produced the greatest security crisis on the European continent since the Cold War. There is now a common understanding that the geopolitical landscape has been radically altered and that this change requires an equally transformed response from Europe, including a clear EU membership perspective for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia (hereafter referenced as the Eastern Trio) and an accelerated accession process for the six Western Balkan countries.

Almost two decades have passed since the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy and more than fifteen years since the first Western Balkan country gained candidate status. Now, the new geopolitical landscape has emerged as the prominent factor in the European Council's decision to accelerate EU enlargement.

This is clearly demonstrated in the General Affairs Council (GAC) December 2023 conclusions on enlargement, which states: [“Enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity.”](#) This framing highlights increased geo-strategic considerations, compared to the pre-2022 conclusions on enlargement, for example those of 2021 or 2020 in which enlargement was referred to as “an investment in peace, democracy, prosperity, security and stability.” Note the order – security and stability have moved up, after peace – and the frankly concerning removal of the word democracy. These changes send mixed signals to (potential) candidate countries regarding expectations for their adherence to these EU values and principles.

The newfound recognition of EU enlargement as a geo-strategic investment stems first from the need to support Ukraine and ensure European unity in the face of Russian aggression. It also acknowledges that lasting stability on the European continent is not possible when there are countries left outside the protection offered by NATO membership and of the European Union. Given Putin's imperialistic ambitions, any stance of non-alignment with the Western Alliance risks inviting further encroachment and destabilisation by Russia.

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This paper argues that, while the next enlargement might not take place swiftly, the EU should not lose time to start an internal reflection on adapting its policies to the new geopolitical circumstances. Focusing notably on security and external relations, it calls for investing heavily in a common defence industry policy, the replacement of the European Neighbourhood Policy, a reassessment of the Eastern Partnership and the deepening of our relations with key non-EU European countries.

## DO NOT EXPECT A SWIFT ENLARGEMENT

Despite the EU's commitment at the highest level, it's evident that the next enlargement will not be an easy nor a rapid process, even for the six Western Balkan countries, some of which are already far along the negotiation process. The European Council made it clear that enlargement remains a merit-based approach and that it will continue to be based on the existing accession criteria. The Commission's November 2023 enlargement package highlighted numerous problematic



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issues for which easy solutions do not exist, even with candidate countries' determined efforts to accelerate reforms. Furthermore, accession to the EU not only depends on the merits of acceding countries but also on unequivocal support from all EU member states, their national parliaments, and, in many cases, the consent of their population.

While the combined GDP of the six Western Balkan countries and the Eastern Trio remains very small in relation to the EU (about 2% in 2022, slightly more than the GDP of Romania or half the level of the GDP of Poland), their level of income, and social conditions remain far lower than that in the EU. According to the World Bank, in 2022 the per capita GDP ranged between 23% of the EU average for Ukraine (the least developed of the nine countries) to 49% of the EU average for Montenegro, the most developed according to this indicator.

Within the EU, there are concerns that a swift accession of new member states could lead to significant challenges. There's apprehension that the competitiveness of exports from these potential new members would disrupt the single market, while their citizens seek better economic opportunities and employment in the richer EU member states. This potential destabilisation underscores the fragility of existing EU member states' commitment to and support of enlargement, as evident in the reactions to larger exports of Ukrainian and Moldovan agricultural products into the EU single market.

Recent public opinion polls in EU member states, such as [the Eurobarometer survey](#) conducted between October and November 2023, reveal mixed sentiments towards enlargement. While a slim majority of EU citizens (51%) are in favour of EU

enlargement, there are wide variations among member states, for example with Spain exhibiting the highest support (73%) and Austria the lowest (30%). While a majority in 23 of the 27 member states is in favour of enlargement, it is notably not the case for France or Germany – and the share of supporters overall has declined since the previous Eurobarometer poll in May/June 2023.

Furthermore, unresolved bilateral issues between candidate countries (e.g. Serbia/Kosovo) and between candidate countries and EU member states (e.g. Bulgaria/North Macedonia) further complicate the enlargement process, alongside the obvious issue of military occupation by Russia or Russian-backed forces in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

There is now a debate in the EU regarding enlargement to countries partially occupied by Russia or Russian-backed separatist forces. Accession of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, where Russia or its proxies hold territorial claims, would prevent the EU from playing the role of honest broker in any of these conflicts due to its solidarity principle with member states. While some analysts point to the concern that admitting these countries amid ongoing conflicts could lead to the EU becoming a belligerent, making accession conditional on resolving these disputes risks giving veto power to Russia.

More generally, compared with the past, the next EU enlargement will be more complicated thanks to external factors. Russia will continue to act as a spoiler, backing anti-EU parties within existing member states and candidate countries. Russian interference is already evident and growing in many Western Balkan countries,

notably in Serbia, as well as in Moldova, particularly in Transnistria and Gagauzia, and in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This interference is likely to continue, as Russia will do its utmost to drag these countries away from their EU paths.

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Another potential obstacle stems from the prospect of a new Trump administration in the United States in 2025, which would likely show lukewarm support for further EU enlargement, notably due to Trump's increased alignment with Russian positions and growing antipathy towards Europe. Given the overall influence of the United States in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Trio in recent years, and their steadfast support of EU accession reforms, a lack of that would reduce the momentum of EU-related reforms.

## PREPARING FOR THE NEXT ENLARGEMENT – INVESTING IN COHESION

To make the next enlargement a success, the EU must step up its support of the security and prosperity of candidates, while the authorities of the nine countries need to increase their commitment to, and implementation of, EU-related reforms.

Unlocking a process of rapid and sustained real income convergence among the nine countries in the short term will bridge the poverty gap and ease the necessary investments in security. This process will require more than strong macroeconomic fundamentals: candidate countries must accelerate domestic reforms across the board. Moreover, the EU must bolster the credibility of the enlargement process to

ensure that economic operators anticipate the benefits of accessing the EU single market. This would trigger much-needed inflows of foreign direct investment in all prospective new member states and thus accelerate modernisation.

In this context, the [Growth Plan](#) proposed by the European Commission for the Western Balkans aims to reinforce the EU's commitment to the enlargement process, notably by providing additional financial resources in support to investments and reforms. Modelled around the EU Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), the plan allocates an additional €6 billion in grants and loans for the period of 2024-2027, supplementing the existing funds under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance. While these new funds will primarily target new investments in connectivity, green initiatives, and economic development, they will also support policy reforms proposed by the candidate countries and endorsed by the EU. This integrated approach to support investments and reforms has been one of the key innovations of the RRF, which enabled public investment in the EU to remain strong during and after the COVID-19 crisis and the following economic shocks.

Also, the setting up of the Ukraine Facility with €50 billion earmarked for the 2024-2027 period and the EU support of the Ukrainian plan for recovery, reconstruction, and modernisation, as well as EU accession related reforms are relevant. EU support to reforms and investments in Georgia and Moldova should likewise be accelerated.

However, as literature on [the middle-income trap](#) makes clear, sustained reforms in the areas of rule of law, fundamental rights, the improvement of the quality of institutions, and, more generally, increasing trust in

society, will be necessary complements to economic reforms and investments. Achieving this will require a ‘whole of society’ reform agenda, with a particular focus on advancing fundamental reforms related to EU accession.

Under the new accession methodology adopted in 2020, negotiations on the fundamental reforms of the enlargement process will be opened first and closed last. The cluster of fundamental reforms comprises the areas of judiciary and fundamental rights (the EU *acquis communautaire*); justice, freedom, and security; the economic criteria; the functioning of democratic institutions; public administration reform; public procurement; statistics, and financial control.

## **FOCUS ON REVIEWING EU POLICIES, NOT ON EU INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS**

The Conclusions of the General Affairs Council of December 2023 emphasise the irreversible nature of the promises made to the nine countries. Ensuring the credibility of the enlargement process, and hence the commitment to the security of the EU and the candidate countries, requires that the EU enhances support for enlargement countries and prepare itself for an expanded EU. As expressed by the European Council of December 2023, the EU has begun an internal reflection process in 2024, focusing on EU policies and institutional issues. The Commission [already made some proposals in March](#) and the Council [will prepare a road map of work](#) in coming weeks.

The main objective of such reflection should be to adjust and design EU policies that ensure greater security and strategic autonomy on the continent as soon as possible, while fostering unity and respect for diversity within the enlarged EU.

This should take precedence over the debate on institutional reform of the EU, which has in fact [already started in earnest](#). Institutional reforms for an enlarged EU will notably involve discussing topics such as whether issues should still fall under the unanimity rule (e.g. taxation, foreign policy), the functioning of the qualified majority voting system to avoid a situation in which a limited number of member states representing a very small share of the EU population could block common action, the number of seats in the European Parliament, and the number of European Commissioners.

Věra Jourová, vice-president of the European Commission for values and transparency, [has indicated that the current set up is reaching its limit](#), particularly concerning the fact that each Member State should have one Commissioner. It is important to recall that, in recent years, the existing institutional structures and rules, where unanimity still prevailed in many key areas or the absence of clear EU competences, did not prevent effective EU actions. In fact, more was done by the EU in the last few years than most would have expected just five years ago – from the Commission issuing bonds on capital markets to the common purchasing of millions of vaccines and the procurement of lethal arms in support of Ukraine. These actions were made possible because there was a clear sense of common interests and purpose among all EU member states. Despite unprecedented challenges, the EU has demonstrated creativity and adaptability to fulfil its collective objectives within existing rules and frameworks.

So, while institutional issues are important, policymakers must not lose sight of these common interests and policies. A starting point in the policy reflection is to focus on strengthening unity in the face of what looks like a new, multi-year confrontation with Russia on the European continent. This

will require the design, or redesign, of policies that ensure solidarity and unity, with all EU member states recognising that their security is tied to the collective security of the European continent and is a shared responsibility well worth the investment. The second factor to consider in redesigning EU policies for the future is also to acknowledge that there will be a constellation of more diverse national interests in an enlarged EU and that this may require a greater mix of action at the national and EU levels in order to reach common objectives.

**The agricultural and cohesion policies, the two main EU policies in terms of budgetary spending, must undergo revision before the next enlargement.**

The agricultural and cohesion policies, the two main EU policies in terms of budgetary spending, must undergo revision before the next enlargement. Regarding the Common Agricultural Policy, a particular challenge will be to ensure continued support for existing farmers of the EU27 countries while supporting the modernisation of the agricultural sectors of the newcomers. For the cohesion policy, a further shift towards the model of the RRF should be pursued, to support better both investments and reforms. In this context, the allocation key should be designed to ensure that the poorer and smaller members states continue to access a greater proportion of these funds.

## **SETTING THE RIGHT PRIORITIES FOR FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY**

With political expressions of populism and nationalism remaining strong in many EU countries, policymakers should be ready to focus on a reduced number of priorities

(specifically security and defence, the single market, strategic autonomy, the green deal) with an appropriate level of funding. Furthermore, they need to agree on more shared actions with member states in the less pressing policy areas, notably to cater to a wider set of different local conditions. Also, while it's important to ensure solidarity with the poorest of the new member states, it should not necessarily be the case that all existing member states would become net payers. This is important for the continued adherence to the EU and to avoid additional exits from the EU, an event that would indeed be a fatal diversion at a time of heightened geopolitical dangers.

In the security and external relations areas, the EU should focus on the following policy priorities:

- **A common defence policy is needed**, with greater EU investment in boosting the EU industrial basis and stepping up efforts to reduce duplications and build common armament platforms. The recent presentation of the European Defence Industrial Strategy, including the launch of the European Defence Investment Programme, by the Commission is a positive start. However, member states must substantially scale up their resources earmarked for the fund, as the initial €1.5 billion is too small to have a meaningful systemic impact on the EU defence industry. Also, more effort is needed towards joint procurement and the establishment of common export control rules of armaments, the lack of which currently hampers common projects.
- **The Eastern Partnership (EaP) requires a strategic reassessment.** Three of the six countries of the EaP are now candidate countries; Belarus has



firmly moved into the Russian orbit and Azerbaijan and Armenia are charting their own independent policy courses. The scope for EU-supported impactful cooperation among the six eastern neighbours remains very limited indeed and the EU would gain little to maintain summits that would include a Belarusian leadership that has allied with Russia. A revamped EaP should prioritise specific technical areas, notably people-to-people contacts, environmental initiatives, cross border cooperation, and other confidence building measures. The more high-level political dialogue could be covered under the umbrella of the European Political Community.

Turkey remains a key ally and the EU must implement a framework that allows both sides to deepen their cooperation in areas of mutual interests

- **The European Neighbourhood Policy needs to be replaced.** An overhaul of the policy framework for the neighbourhood is not a realistic short-term option. While the 2004 ambition to establish a ring of friends around the EU remains valid, the geopolitical reality is that many countries in the eastern and in southern neighbourhood are not interested in deepening ties with the EU, and ongoing conflicts (notably the Armenia/Azerbaijan and the Israel/Hamas war) further hamper cooperation.

Thus, a more pragmatic and transactional approach is needed, one tailored for those partners that have no perspective of, or willingness for, EU accession, and that reflects both EU interests and the level of ambition of each partner. For example, cooperation with North African countries can focus on economic and social development and reducing the wealth gap between

the southern and northern shores of the Mediterranean that fuels political tensions and migratory pressures. Additionally, initiatives that target countries in the Levant could grant the EU more meaningful influence in resolving the long-standing conflicts of the region and more effectively mitigating their humanitarian consequences, such as displacement.

- **The framework of bilateral relations with Turkey needs attention.** EU-Turkey relations were not covered in the enlargement section of the December 2023 European Council Conclusions. The Conclusions of the December General Affairs Council excluded Turkey from the sentence referring to the full and unequivocal EU commitment to the EU membership perspective of the nine other candidates. While the Council had decided to put accession negotiations at a standstill in 2018, Turkey remains a key ally and the EU must implement a framework that allows both sides to deepen their cooperation in areas of mutual interests, based on the ideas [presented in the Joint Communication from the High Representative and the Commission](#).
- **Building closer relations with the UK, Switzerland, and Norway** is essential. Regardless of their status, all three countries have a stake in the security, stability, and strategic autonomy of the European continent. The EU must therefore strengthen ties with the UK in the defence sector, including through cooperation with the European Defence Agency and in the context of the new European Defence Industrial Plan.

Negotiations with Switzerland on a new comprehensive framework for bilateral relations should be launched in earnest now that [the negotiating mandate has](#)

[been approved](#). And, in regards to Norway and Switzerland, particular attention must be given to energy security, protection of critical infrastructure, access to critical materials, and the development of common projects for enhancing strategic autonomy. All this would complement the European Political Community, which is likely to focus on high level political dialogue among European leaders but with little capacity for concrete action on its own.

important to remain impound to a technical discussion and it should also be discussed outside the confines of nationalist and EU political parties.

## CONCLUSIONS

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine poses a fundamental challenge to the European security order and to the safety of all European nations. Addressing this threat requires increased unity and a new wave of EU enlargement that will strengthen solidarity and mutual security across Europe.

The EU must adapt to the dangerous geopolitical environment by intensifying its focus on a common defence and security policy, as well as revising its approach to neighbouring countries. This will require a fundamental review of the EU budget. With an expanding number of member states and greater EU action in new policy areas, it is high time to abandon the 1% ceiling and find new resources to support the much-needed common investments. This will, in turn, necessitate that the work on new EU-owned resources is finally completed.

In many member states, the debate on further EU enlargement is focused on the possible negative economic and social impact, particularly on sectors such as agriculture and steel. It's therefore important for EU policymakers to introduce a public campaign that properly explains why further enlargement is critical and will contribute to the peace and security of all the EU member states. Enlargement is too

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