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# Upgrading EU Enlargement Methodology: **Enhancing Accession Prospects for the New Eastern Candidates**

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## **Introduction**

The prospects for progress in the process of accession to the European Union (EU) primarily revolve around two core areas: enhancing domestic readiness within the candidate countries in the Western Balkans as well as Ukraine and Moldova, and adapting the EU's enlargement toolbox to ensure the accession process is effective and irreversible. Nonetheless, the EU has encountered significant challenges in motivating Türkiye and 6 Western Balkan countries to undertake comprehensive reforms within and align with the policy framework encompassing 33 chapters of the EU enlargement process. Montenegro, Serbia and Türkiye are the only three countries that managed to open chapters of negotiations, while Montenegro is the only candidate state that has opened all 33 chapters, closing 3 of them provisionally.

Drawing from the accession experiences of both Türkiye and the Western Balkan states, the EU has gleaned valuable lessons that should be applied to the (pre-)accession dialogue with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. This is particularly relevant as all three Eastern Partnership countries (EaP) have been incorporated into the revised enlargement package of the EU. The circulating proposals to revise the 2020 enlargement methodology introduce new elements for consideration by EU institutions and Member States (MSs). These factors come into play as Ukraine and Moldova's compliance with EU conditionality for the initiation of accession negotiations is under examination.

This policy paper delves into three crucial aspects of the enlargement process. First, it examines the geopolitical considerations, outlining the parameters of support for enlargement and emphasising the need for these processes to occur in the near future rather than in a distant timeline. Second, the paper provides a systematic and concise analysis of the disparities between the "Revised Enlargement Methodology" (REM) and the think-tank proposals to enhance it, including staged accession and other elements outlined in the Franco-German proposal. Through a careful analysis of the pros and cons of these initiatives, the paper aims to determine which elements best serve the accession goals of aspiring Eastern European states.

Third, the paper highlights the experiences of Türkiye and the Western Balkan states, extracting valuable lessons that can provide guidance for both the EU and the three Eastern Partnership countries: Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The policy paper concludes by presenting a comprehensive set of recommendations derived from the analysis of the REM and the proposals for its improvement. These recommendations are informed by the challenges that Türkiye and the Western Balkans are encountering during their accession processes, offering valuable insights for the new aspirants in the Eastern European region.

# 1. Geopolitical momentum of enlargement

The prospects for future enlargement remain uncertain, given the historically slow pace of accession, coupled with several episodes of backsliding in Türkiye and the Western Balkans, particularly in the realms of the rule of law, democratic institutions, and the fostering of good neighbourly relations between aspiring states and EU MSs. Progress in terms of compliance with the EU acquis or practices has been lacking, even in technical and sectoral areas. This is primarily due to chronic deficiencies in the public sector, which are marked by underdeveloped institutions, widespread corruption, and an overall shortage of qualified human resources and expertise within public service.

Nonetheless, the EU has come to realise that ambiguity regarding the accession process can lead to increased instability and detachment from the EU among its immediate neighbours, potentially leading to deepening de-Europeanisation trends across the region, beyond Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, the EU aims to reinvigorate the enlargement process through its accession dialogues with Ukraine and Moldova, injecting new energy while upholding the principle of differentiation.

Initially, the EU expedited the status of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, particularly in the context of security and geopolitics. The Russian factor played a pivotal role in the swift granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, with an interim potential candidacy for Georgia, all achieved in record time. While the duration between submitting an application for EU membership and receiving candidate status from Brussels typically spanned between 1 and 6 years for most Western Balkan nations (excluding Kosovo), Ukraine and Moldova secured candidate status in less than 6 months.<sup>1</sup> This underscored that Russian aggression acted as the catalyst, rather than reflecting that the objective preparedness of these two Eastern neighbours was rewarded by the EU.

In the fall of 2023, the political signals emanating from various EU officials are pointing towards a positive scenario, where the initiation of accession dialogues with Ukraine and Moldova might occur in 2024. In her 2023 State of the Union speech, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen advocated for an EU with “30+”<sup>2</sup> member countries. She presented a vision for future enlargement that would encompass the six Western Balkan

countries, Ukraine, and Moldova. However, her remarks were less explicit about Georgia and did not mention Türkiye. The latter is not officially regarded as part of the Revised Enlargement Methodology (REM), which was approved for the Western Balkans and is slated to be applied to the aspiring countries in Eastern Europe.

Germany has taken a proactive approach toward future enlargement involving not only the Western Balkans but also Ukraine, Moldova, and potentially Georgia, as outlined in its new National Security Strategy launched in June 2023<sup>3</sup>. A central tenet emphasised in the German document is the alignment of shared values with the EU. German support for enlargement is closely linked to EU institutional reform. In this initiative, Germany finds support from France, with both nations jointly driving the discussion on institutional reform through the establishment of the Franco-German Working Group. This group has put forth a series of proposals encompassing changes in the EU’s institutional framework, including amendments to existing EU treaties. Additionally, the group has offered recommendations aimed at streamlining the enlargement process.

The necessity for EU institutional reform was underscored by French President Emmanuel Macron during his annual meeting with French diplomats in August 2023. However, Macron’s vision of EU decision-making reform could lead to a “multi-speed”<sup>4</sup> union, hinting at the prospect of “staged accession”<sup>5</sup>. This approach allows for deeper integration of candidate and potential candidate states, totalling 10 today, based on their merits and geopolitical willingness to align with the EU on both domestic and external policies. It’s important to note that Ukraine strongly opposes any alternative to full EU membership, insisting on fully-fledged membership, an assertion underscored by the context of Russian military aggression.<sup>6</sup>

Against the backdrop of previous challenges and slow progress in the accession processes of Türkiye and the Western Balkans, the EU leadership has expressed optimism about future enlargement efforts, outlining ambitious timeframes. At the Bled Strategic Forum in August 2023, President of the European Council Charles Michel emphasised the need to view enlargement not merely as a “dream”<sup>7</sup> and set a breakthrough horizon for 2030. Michel’s stance aligns with the official positions of France and Germany, emphasising the necessity of EU reform before the next wave of enlargement.



Apart from fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria, including strong democratic institutions, compliance with membership obligations, adherence to the EU acquis, a functioning market economy, and the ability to handle competition, the EU must also be prepared to incorporate new members. In addition to these criteria, the Western Balkan countries are required to implement the Stabilisation and Association Process, emphasising regional cooperation and fostering good neighbourly relations. For Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, continuous implementation of the Association Agreements signed in 2014 is essential, reflecting the EU's expectations from these Eastern European countries.

The proposed EU reforms in the enlargement process aim to dismantle previously slow and ineffective accession mechanisms. The merit-based principle remains paramount, with EU officials highlighting stringent standards for future enlargement both symbolically and practically. During his visit to Tbilisi, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, emphasised the importance of meritocracy, categorically stating that “no shortcuts” would be accepted “neither for Georgia, nor anyone else”<sup>8</sup>. This commitment to rejecting shortcuts was reaffirmed in the Athens Summit Declaration of August 21, 2023<sup>9</sup>. While there is a practical understanding of the necessity to meet EU membership conditions, the insistence on adherence carries profound geopolitical symbolism. It signifies the reshaping of Europe's map, encompassing not just the Western Balkans but also Ukraine and Moldova. This underscores the region's pivotal role in the broader European landscape, as well as emphasising the EU's commitment to transforming candidate states through enlargement.

The EU's approach to future enlargement appears contradictory due to the frequent exclusion of Türkiye and Georgia from the discussion. Despite Türkiye initiating accession negotiations in 2005 and Georgia becoming a potential candidate in 2022, these countries are often overlooked in discussions about future prospects for accession. This exclusion raises questions about the EU's consistency and transparency in its enlargement strategy. The geopolitical misalignments and a poor track record of rule of law reforms in these countries seem to be used by the EU as reasons to disengage with Türkiye and Georgia. Instead, these challenges should serve as catalysts for the EU to adopt a more proactive and targeted approach to address the backslidings in these nations.

The EU's enlargement policy is undergoing a resurgence, with its success dependent on Brussels' ability to use the progress in Ukraine and Moldova as a catalyst for inspiring the Western Balkans. This positions the EU as a central player, emphasising the need for tangible outcomes in the Eastern flank of the accession process. The effectiveness of this approach is contingent upon the Eastern Partnership countries' ability to implement reforms, potentially swaying pro-EU sentiments in Georgia and Türkiye. It is crucial to avoid replicating the failures witnessed in the Western Balkans for this strategy to yield positive results.

The credibility of opening accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova serves as the initial litmus test for the capacity of Eastern European candidates to drive the enlargement process. The EU's employment of the merit-based principle is contingent on the scrupulous monitoring of Ukraine and Moldova's compliance with the conditionality requirements—7 and 9 conditions, respectively. Any exceptions made by the EU to initiate accession dialogues with these countries must have a strong justification. The EU should exhibit principled leadership by both demanding substantial reforms and rewarding progress, which is essential to avoid compromising situations that could impede the revitalisation of the enlargement process.

In summary, the EU is driven by a strong geopolitical ambition to improve the enlargement policy. It staunchly asserts that accession standards will not be lowered, emphasising a commitment against shortcuts. The upcoming accession dialogues with Ukraine and Moldova appear to serve as catalysts, igniting interest and healthy competition among neighbouring aspirants within the enlargement package. The enlargement policy's core principle remains merit-based, which underscores the enduring relevance of the differentiation principle. States undertaking reforms are incentivised with new opportunities for accession, engaging in a competitive process toward EU membership. The renewed enthusiasm for enlargement is substantially motivated by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which poses potential future risks. If the conflict prolongs or nationalist-driven fatigue weakens current pro-Ukrainian solidarity, it could diminish interest in accession, challenging the current unity within Europe.

## 2. The transformation of the enlargement mechanics

The practicality and feasibility of the enlargement process face intense scrutiny, driven by the imperative to align it with evolving geopolitical trends. The EU's departure from its historical reluctance to extend candidacy beyond the Western Balkans and Türkiye was highlighted by Ukraine's and, subsequently, Moldova's candidacy, with a potential future opening for Georgia. This pivotal moment for the new candidates and potential candidates necessitates a departure from older enlargement methodologies, including those proposed merely three years ago. Therefore, the ongoing analysis of the latest enlargement mechanisms and the 2022-2023 initiatives holds vital significance in identifying crucial elements that can enhance the efficacy of EU accession for Eastern European candidates.

In this context, the three examined enlargement paradigms—the New Enlargement Methodology (REM), the Staged Accession Model (SAM), and the Franco-German proposal—are critically assessed for key components, incentives, and sanctions. This objective evaluation aims to discern the most pertinent elements that can streamline and optimise the EU accession process for Eastern European candidates, as well as for existing candidates who have long been in the “waiting room”.

### Revised Enlargement Methodology (REM)

After nearly a decade since Croatia's accession in July 2013, the EU found itself grappling with a stagnant accession process. Guided by French leadership and bolstered by support from other member states<sup>10</sup>, the EU unveiled the Revised Enlargement Methodology (REM) in 2020. The fundamental goal was to rejuvenate the accession process, transforming it into a “more credible, dynamic, and predictable” journey with “a stronger political steer”<sup>11</sup>. The EU Commission argued that this enhancement aimed to fortify the process, ultimately paving the way for full EU membership. Importantly, the EU reiterated its commitment to the Western Balkans, emphasising that the region remained a “top priority”<sup>12</sup>.

The REM is underpinned by *four fundamental principles*: enhancing credibility, providing a more robust political direction, injecting dynamism, and ensuring

predictability. This shift marked a significant departure, signalling the EU's renewed dedication to its enlargement policy.

The concept of **'credibility'** within the EU's enlargement framework emphasises a heightened focus on fundamental reforms, specifically addressing issues related to the rule of law, democratic institutions, and public administration. Meeting these criteria is deemed indispensable for any progress in the accession process. This shift reflects the EU's insistence on substantial, tangible reforms as a prerequisite for advancement.

In the pursuit of a **'stronger political steer'**, the EU has taken significant steps to elevate the dialogue with candidate countries to a higher level of political-policy commitment. The proposal to conduct Inter-Governmental Conferences serves as a mechanism for intensifying political engagement between the EU and the aspiring nations. This move represents a deliberate effort to enhance the political dimension of the accession process, indicating the EU's commitment to fostering more robust and meaningful relationships with candidate countries.

To infuse **'more dynamism'** into the enlargement process, the EU has structured the accession negotiations into *six thematic clusters*: 1) *fundamentals*; 2) *internal market*; 3) *competitiveness and inclusive growth*; 4) *green agenda and sustainable connectivity*; 5) *resources, agriculture, and cohesion*; and 6) *external relations*. Notably, the initial cluster, 'Fundamentals,' serves as the gateway, being both the first to open and the last to close. Progress made in the 'Fundamentals' cluster holds paramount importance, as significant advancements here are prerequisites for the initiation of discussions in other clusters.

In its pursuit of **'more predictability'**, the EU has adopted a dual approach. Positive incentives are offered to aspiring candidates demonstrating notable progress, including options like 'accelerated integration' and 'phasing-in' to specific EU policies. Conversely, there are negative consequences for lack of progress. Proposed penalties for stagnation or backsliding in the accession process include: *re-opening of previously closed chapters or reversibility*; *halting or withdrawal from EU programs*; *downward adjustment of EU funding*; and, in the most severe cases, *partial or complete suspension of the accession negotiations*. This combination of positive and negative reinforcement mechanisms aims to provide a clear and predictable path for candidate countries, emphasising the importance of sustained reforms and progress in their EU accession journeys.

The REM, implemented for the Western Balkans, initially with the exception of Serbia and Montenegro, introduced a mechanism where the EU Commission or a member state could propose sanction measures. These measures could be approved through a simplified voting process, requiring the agreement of 14 out of 27 member states<sup>13</sup>. The system operates on the principles of ‘more for more’ and ‘less for less,’ reflecting positive and negative conditionality. The EU openly acknowledges that the current accession process is more rigorous than before<sup>14</sup>, implying higher standards for new candidates than for previous ones. Consequently, the revised methodology demands that current candidate states meet standards that might prove challenging, even for certain existing member states. This shift underscores the EU’s commitment to maintaining strict criteria for accession, emphasising the need for aspiring nations to demonstrate substantial progress and compliance with EU standards.

## Staged Association Model (SAM)

The development of the ‘Staged Association Model’ (SAM) underscores a meticulous analysis by think-tank experts in response to the revised methodology. Introduced in the fall of 2021 and refined in August 2023<sup>15</sup>, the SAM seeks to bolster the credibility and efficacy of the EU’s enlargement policy. Notably, the SAM is crafted to be seamlessly integrated without necessitating an overhaul of the EU’s institutional structure. The fundamental concept behind staged accession is to fortify the key aspects of credibility, robust political guidance, dynamism, and predictability inherent in the REM. This approach showcases a strategic adaptation, aligning with the evolving needs of the enlargement process while preserving the integrity of existing EU frameworks.

The SAM is structured into five distinct stages: 1) pre-stage candidate status or ‘stage 0’; 2) intermediate pre-accession or ‘stage 1’; 3) advanced pre-accession or ‘stage 2’; 4) new member state or ‘stage 3’; and 5) conventional membership or ‘stage 4’ (as shown in Table 1 below).

**Table 1.** Key aspects of the Staged Accession Model

Stages	Characteristics
Pre-stage candidate status Stage 0	<i>Institutional integration:</i> Limited access to Commission Expert Groups, Comitology and EU agencies <i>Access to EU funds vs. national contribution:</i> None

Stages	Characteristics
Intermediate pre-accession Stage 1	<i>Institutional integration:</i> EU Council, European Council and European Parliament. <i>Access to EU funds vs. national contribution:</i> 35-40% vs. 0%
Advanced pre-accession Stage 2	<i>Institutional integration:</i> All institutions <i>Access to EU funds vs. national contribution:</i> 55-60% vs. 0-15%
New member state Stage 3	<i>Institutional integration:</i> All institutions <i>Access to EU funds vs. national contribution:</i> 100% vs. 50-100%
Conventional membership Stage 4	<i>Institutional integration:</i> All institutions <i>Access to EU funds vs. national contribution:</i> 100% vs. 100%

Source: Author’s compilation based on the publication “Template 2.0 for Staged Accession to the EU”<sup>16</sup>

In the proposed ‘**Stage 0**’, the acceding country would be granted sporadic and limited involvement in the work of Commission Expert Groups, Comitology, and EU agencies. Accession funding at this stage relies on existing EU financial support.

Moving to ‘**Stage 1**’, the SAM suggests offering selective yet regularised and broader participation in key EU institutions such as the EU Council, the European Council, and the European Parliament. The funding formula entails 35-40% access to EU funds, with no national contribution required from the acceding states to the EU budget.

Upon reaching ‘**Stage 2**’, acceding states would have comprehensive participation in all EU institutions. The EU’s commitment would involve providing access to 55-60% of its funds, with up to 15% of national transfers to the EU budget coming from the acceding states. This staged approach not only integrates the new members progressively but also ensures a balance between financial responsibilities and benefits, fostering a smoother integration process.

In ‘**Stage 3**’, the proposed model maintains the institutional participation suggested in previous stages. Acceding states would have full access to EU funds at this point, with national contributions to the EU budget varying from 50-100%. Upon reaching ‘**Stage 4**’, both access to EU funds and the national contribution to the EU budget would be at 100%.

Upon reaching **'Stage 3'**, New Member States (NMSs) would be eligible to join the Eurozone and Schengen, and their populations would enjoy EU citizens' rights. In terms of decision-making, NMSs would have limited rights in the EU Council. While they could form blocking minorities in simple or qualified majority voting (QMV), they would face a ten-year restriction on using veto power for issues requiring unanimity voting. After the expiration of this ten-year temporary voting restriction, the NMSs would transition into conventional members. This staged progression not only ensures a gradual integration process but also presents a clear roadmap for the acceding countries, outlining their rights and responsibilities as they move towards full EU membership.

The progression from one stage to another in the staged accession process is contingent upon the preparedness of acceding countries to meet the conditions outlined in the chapters within the six clusters, as mandated by the REM. Staged accession involves allocating funds from the financial Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA) into two categories: funds for systemic reforms (such as public administration reform, etc.) included in the 'Fundamentals', and funds for preparatory efforts to manage multi-annual operational programs (like ENPARD, etc.).

Lastly, the SAM emphasises more robust enforcement of the reversibility mechanism, requiring the EU Commission to both acknowledge backsliding and advocate for freezing or fully withdrawing funds. A stringent application of the 'less for less' principle is proposed for the SAM in Stages '1' and '2'. Post-accession evaluation, linked to 'Stage 3', will be conducted through the Rule of Law Monitoring Mechanism employed by the European Commission for member states. Adherence to EU values and principles will ultimately determine the final upgrade to conventional membership status. This nuanced approach ensures that acceding countries not only progress but also adhere steadfastly to EU standards, fostering a deeper integration process and upholding the core values of the EU.

## Franco-German Proposal

The latest wave of ideas concerning the enlargement process has emerged from the 2023 report by the Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform<sup>17</sup>. This group delved into the objectives of "widening and deepening" the EU, aiming to amalgamate the intricate and increasingly interconnected processes of EU decision-making and institutional reform with the mechanisms of

enlargement. The proposals outlined by the Franco-German Group, known as the Franco-German proposals, are geared toward enhancing the EU's capacity for enlargement, a critical requirement outlined in the fourth condition of the Copenhagen trio criteria necessary for future enlargement.

One of the key points to these proposals is the concept of four concentric circles, which delineates the EU's geopolitical ambitions. These circles include: 1) the inner circle comprising EU member states focused on deeper integration and encompassing the Eurozone and Schengen Area; 2) the EU comprising existing and potential member states, including current candidates and potential entrants; 3) Associate Members or a new category involving EEA countries, Switzerland, the UK, and other nations rejecting the notion of an 'ever closer union'; 4) states not part of the first three circles but integrated into the European Political Community.

The Franco-German proposal introduces a forward-looking vision, aiming to prepare the EU institutionally by 2030 for the next wave of enlargement, contingent upon candidate states meeting the necessary criteria. This plan highlights a crucial political commitment, especially after the 2024 EU elections, to enable the prospect of enlargement by 2030. Notably, the proposal advocates for a 'regatta' style of enlargement, a departure from the existing model of large-scale waves, suggesting the formation of smaller, focused groups of countries. Importantly, this approach doesn't adhere strictly to geographic principles, signifying a shift towards a more tailored and strategic enlargement strategy.

The outlined guiding principles, totalling nine, are segmented into two distinct categories. The first category pertains to **qualifications/eligibility for accession**, encompassing the following aspects:

1. **'Fundamentals First'** underscores the significance of meeting political accession criteria and adhering to EU principles rooted in democratic principles and the rule of law.
2. **The Geopolitical component** emphasises alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, particularly in the context of sanctions policy.
3. **Conflict Resolution** addresses the presence of enduring military conflicts and territorial disputes among candidate states. The existence of uncontrolled territories within candidate states or territorial disputes with non-EU nations does not impede the enlargement process.

**4. Additional Technical and Financial Support** emphasises the EU's role in enhancing the administrative and absorption capacity of candidate states, emphasising the need for increased support.

**5. Democratic Legitimacy** focuses on fostering interaction between the European Parliament and the national parliaments of candidate states. It also stresses engaging the population in the accession states through participatory mechanisms at the EU level.

By addressing these multifaceted aspects, the EU would be able to ensure a comprehensive and robust evaluation process for potential accession states, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in the enlargement process of distinct countries.

The *second category* of guiding principles focuses on the dynamics of the accession process and includes the following four elements:

- 1. Equality** underscores the need to prevent the discrediting of the merit-based process by avoiding fast-tracking, ensuring that all candidate states are evaluated on equal grounds, and preserving the integrity of the accession process.
- 2. Systematisation** emphasises the importance of proposing a coherent methodology, particularly concerning the phasing-in and conditionality for sectoral integration. It advocates for a staged

approach to gaining participation rights in EU institutions, promoting a systematic and structured progression.

**3. Reversibility** highlights the necessity of partial integration reversal if a candidate state breaches EU principles and values or shifts its strategic orientation in terms of geopolitical preferences. This principle ensures that the integration process can be adjusted in response to changing circumstances.

**4. Qualified Majority Voting (QMV)** suggests using this mechanism to approve new accession stages with a candidate state, avoiding the potential blocking power of a single member state. This proposal, however, is balanced by the concept of 'double unanimity,' which involves unanimity among member states in the EU Council and positive results in ratification referenda within the EU member states. This dual approach aims to strike a balance between efficient decision-making and respecting the democratic will of EU member states.

The nine principles outlined by the Franco-German proposals reflect a nuanced approach from the EU, addressing the intricate complexities inherent in the accession process. By emphasising equality, systematisation, reversibility, and introducing a careful balance between QMV and 'double unanimity,' the Franco-German proposals suggest that the EU should operate with an adaptable framework in the enlargement policy, considering the practical challenges of decision-making within a diverse union.

**Table 2.** Comparison of enlargement mechanisms of the REM, the SAM and the Franco-German Proposal

	Revised Enlargement Methodology	Staged Accession Model	Franco-German proposal
<b>Key dimensions</b>	<p><b>Credibility:</b> Increased attention to the fundamentals.</p> <p><b>Stronger political steer:</b> Higher political-policy EU commitment.</p> <p><b>More dynamism:</b> Six thematic clusters, where the 'Fundamentals' is a driving cluster.</p> <p><b>More predictability:</b> Positive incentives and sanctioning measures, depending on the quality of the accession process.</p>	<p><b>Four stages of accession:</b></p> <p>Stage 0 - Pre-stage candidate status</p> <p>Stage 1 - Intermediate pre-accession</p> <p>Stage 2 - Advanced pre-accession</p> <p>Stage 3 - New member state</p> <p>Stage 4 - Conventional membership</p>	<p><b>Eligibility:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fundamental</li> <li>• Geopolitical</li> <li>• Conflict resolution</li> <li>• Additional EU support</li> <li>• Democratic legitimacy</li> </ul> <p><b>Dynamism:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Equality</li> <li>• Systematisation</li> <li>• Reversibility</li> <li>• QMV</li> </ul> <p><b>Enlargement:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preparedness by the 2030</li> <li>• 'Regatta' principle</li> </ul>



	Revised Enlargement Methodology	Staged Accession Model	Franco-German proposal
<b>Incentives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Accelerated integration</li> <li>'Phasing-in' to EU programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gradual institutional integration – unfolds in stages, evolving from involvement in Commission Expert Groups, Comitology, and EU agencies in Stage 0 to participation in the EU Council, the European Council, and the European Parliament in Stages 1 and 2.</li> <li>Faster gradual access to EU funds vs. slower increasing contribution to the EU budget</li> <li>Increased funds for Fundamentals-related reforms.</li> </ul>	Additional EU support Systematisation
<b>Sanctions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Re-opening of the closed chapters or reversibility.</li> <li>Pausing or withdrawing from EU programs.</li> <li>Reducing EU funding.</li> <li>Partial or complete suspension of the accession negotiations.</li> </ul>	Enforced reversibility is solely linked to deviations from EU values and principles.	Reversibility, activated by deviations from EU values and a shift in pro-EU strategic orientation.

Source: Author's compilation

### 3. Learnings from the Balkans

The nonlinear, complex, and intricate experiences encountered while engaging with the Western Balkans and Türkiye provide essential insights for the EU as it seeks to refine its enlargement policy. Drawing from the lessons learned during the accession dialogues with non-Central and Eastern European candidates, particularly with Türkiye at the end of the 1990s and starting in the 2000s with the Balkan nations, the EU can take steps to prevent the recurrence of past errors within its own policies and mitigate their replication among the newcomers in the enlargement package, specifically Ukraine, Moldova, and potentially Georgia.

Both Türkiye and the Western Balkan states – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia – have undergone a

transformation in their European trajectories, transitioning from a broader European perspective to a more focused and intricate process associated with the accession journey.

Judging from the EU's evaluations included in the Enlargement Package for 2022, it can be concluded that the progress achieved by the states with a candidate and potential candidate status is fairly modest. The poor results of the accession journey show that the EU faces difficulties in sustaining progress and improving the quality of reforms (see *Table 3 below*). The EU's constraints occur despite the fact that the majority of its neighbours involved in (pre-) accession dialogues have fairly small populations, strong export dependence on the EU market, and financial support for the accession reforms based on Annual Action Plans, financed from the EU's 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework that devoted €14.162 billion for the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA).

**Table 3.** Key Indicators of EU Neighbours with Candidate and Potential Candidate Status

EU neighbour	Population, millions	Candidate status / accession negotiations	Opened / provisionally closed chapters out of a total of 35	Export – import with the EU, %	Pre-accession funds, Annual Action Plan, €, millions
<b>Türkiye</b>	2020: 83.1	1999 / 2005	16 / 1	2022: 41 / 26.5	2020: 399 <sup>18</sup>
<b>North Macedonia</b>	2020: 2.07	2005 / 2022	-	2021: 79 / 46	2021: 90.4
<b>Montenegro</b>	2020: 0.6	2010 / 2012	33 / 3	2021: 31 / 45	2021: 32.4
<b>Serbia</b>	2020: 6.9	2012 / 2014	22 / 2	2021: 65 / 57	2021: 122.1
<b>Albania</b>	2020: 2.8	2014 / 2022	-	2021: 72 / 54	2022: 82.6
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	2019: 3.4	2022 / -	-	2022: 73.6 / 56.9	2021: 73
<b>Kosovo</b>	2020: 1.7	-	-	2022: 12 / 88	2021: 63.9
<b>Ukraine</b>	2023: 36.7	2022 / -	-	2022: 63.1 / 48.9	-
<b>Moldova</b>	2023: 2.6	2022 / -	-	2022: 58.7 / 45	-
<b>Georgia</b>	2023: 3.7	-	-	2022: 15.4 / 22.7	-

Source: Author's Compilation Based on Content Analysis of EU 2022 Enlargement Package Reports for Türkiye, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo<sup>19</sup>. The trade data for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is retrieved from the Directorate-General for Trade<sup>20</sup>. Chapter 34 on 'Institutions' and Chapter 35 on 'Other Issues' are currently not applicable to Montenegro and Serbia.

**Türkiye / Accession negotiations 2005:** According to the EU's 2022 evaluation<sup>21</sup>, only 16 out of 33 chapters have been opened in Türkiye's accession process. Throughout the 17-year dialogue, Türkiye has been able to provisionally close only one chapter, specifically in the field of *science and research* (Cluster 2)<sup>22</sup>. Türkiye holds the distinction of having the most advanced sectoral relations with the EU, primarily due to its common Customs Union with the EU for nearly 28 years, since January 1995. However, along with Kosovo, Türkiye remains among the countries in the enlargement package that do not enjoy a visa-free regime with the EU. The accession negotiations have reached a standstill, primarily due to the stagnation of reforms related to democratic institutions, checks and balances, and fundamental rights. Despite the challenges in the accession dialogue, between 2021 and 2022, the EU and Tür-

kiye have engaged in high-level dialogues covering various areas, including climate, health, agriculture, migration, and politics. Despite the provisional closure of just one chapter, the EU has discerned a somewhat mixed landscape, with instances of '*well advanced-good progress*' alongside areas in the '*early stages*' (see Table 4 below). The EU reported backsliding in the judiciary sector within the *Fundamentals* (Cluster 1). This is characterised by undue political pressure on the judiciary, which also has significant negative implications for implementing judgments from the European Court of Human Rights. Despite nearly two decades of accession negotiations with the EU, Türkiye is demonstrating trends that deviate from EU standards, particularly in the areas of rule of law, fundamental rights, trade practices, and foreign policy.

**Table 4.** Highlights of Türkiye's Preparedness and Progress in Meeting EU Recommendations

Preparedness		Progress in meeting EU recommendations
<i>Well advanced/good level</i>	<i>Early stage</i>	<i>Serious backsliding</i>
<p><b>Cluster 1 – 3 areas:</b> Functioning market economy (<i>Market economy</i>); Capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces with the Union (<i>Coping capacity</i>); Financial control.</p> <p><b>Cluster 2 – 5 areas:</b> Free movement of goods (<i>Goods</i>); Company law; Intellectual property rights (<i>IPR</i>); Financial services; Consumer and health protection (<i>Health</i>).</p> <p><b>Cluster 3 – 2 areas:</b> Customs union (<i>Customs</i>).</p> <p><b>Cluster 4 – one area:</b> Trans-European networks (<i>TEN</i>).</p>	<p><b>Cluster 1 – 3 areas:</b> Functioning judiciary (<i>Judiciary</i>); Fight against corruption (<i>Corruption</i>); Freedom of expression.</p> <p><b>Cluster 2 – 2 areas:</b> Free movement of workers (<i>Workers</i>); Right of establishment and freedom to provide services (<i>Establishment</i>).</p>	<p><b>Cluster 1 – 3 areas:</b> Judiciary and fundamental rights (<i>Judiciary and rights</i>); Judiciary; Freedom of expression.</p> <p><b>Cluster 3 – 2 areas:</b> Digital transformation and media (<i>Digital</i>); Economic and monetary policy (<i>Monetary</i>).</p> <p><b>Cluster 5 – one area:</b> Agriculture and rural development (<i>Agriculture</i>).</p> <p><b>Cluster 6 – one area:</b> Foreign, security, and defence policy (<i>Foreign policy</i>).</p>

Source: Author's Compilation Based on Content Analysis of EU 2022 Enlargement Package Reports for Türkiye

**Montenegro / Accession negotiations 2012:** After a decade of dedicated EU accession endeavours, the EU enlargement report for 2022 highlights the outcome of the efforts registered by Montenegro, the smallest candidate state, which has effectively opened all 33 applicable chapters of the accession process. Within this framework, three chapters—*science and research* (Chapter 25), *education and culture* (Chapter 26), and *external relations* (Chapter 30)—have reached provisional closure<sup>23</sup>. Key challenges revolve around administrative capacity and the full implementation of EU energy regulations, particularly in terms of enforcement capabilities. The EU has raised concerns about Montenegro's "loss of know-how on the EU accession process" and "the

overall slowing of the pace of reforms"<sup>24</sup>. These issues stem from the restructuring of public administration and legislative changes in 2021, which reduced the standards for merit-based appointments in the public sector. In theory, Montenegro's status as a small-sized country could serve as an advantage in the implementation of EU accession reforms. Nevertheless, the country faces the downside of lacking sufficient human and administrative capacity to meet the rigorous requirements effectively. Although Montenegro registered 'limited progress' in various sectors, it has no 'backsliding' like Türkiye. In addition, it has 'good-moderate' readiness across various sectors (see Table 5 below).

**Table 5.** Highlights of Montenegro's Preparedness and Progress in Meeting EU Recommendations

Preparedness	Progress in meeting EU recommendations
<i>Good-moderate level</i>	<i>Limited progress</i>
<p><b>Cluster 1 – 3 areas:</b> Market economy; Coping capacity; Public procurement.</p> <p><b>Cluster 2 – 2 areas:</b> Company law; IPR.</p> <p><b>Cluster 3 – 3 areas:</b> Transport; Energy; TEN.</p> <p><b>Cluster 6 – one area:</b> Foreign policy.</p>	<p><b>Cluster 1 – 7 areas:</b> Public administration Reform (<i>PAR</i>); Judiciary and rights; Corruption; Judiciary; Freedom of expression; Statistics; Financial control.</p> <p><b>Cluster 2 – 3 areas:</b> Workers; Establishment; Health.</p> <p><b>Cluster 3 – 3 areas:</b> Digital; Monetary; Customs.</p> <p><b>Cluster 4 – 2 areas:</b> TEN; Environment and climate change (<i>Environment</i>).</p> <p><b>Cluster 5 – 3 areas:</b> Fisheries; Regional policy and coordination of structural instruments (<i>Regional</i>); Financial and budgetary provisions (<i>Budgetary</i>).</p>

Source: Author's Compilation Based on Content Analysis of EU 2022 Enlargement Package Reports for Montenegro

**Serbia / Accession negotiations 2014:** As of 2022, Serbia has made progress in opening 22 out of the 33 eligible chapters for EU accession and has provisionally closed Chapters 25 and 26, which pertain to *science and research*, and *education and culture*, respectively<sup>25</sup>. The majority of these opened chapters were initiated between 2017 and 2019. All chapters related to *Cluster 4*, which encompasses the *Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity*, were opened in December 2021. Notably, the only sector where the EU has signalled ‘backsliding’ is in *foreign, security, and defence policy* (Cluster 6). This regression is linked to Serbia’s non-alignment with the EU’s sanctions on Russia, which were imposed due to Russia’s full-scale military aggression against

Ukraine, beginning in February 2022. In Serbia’s case, the accession process is closely tied to the reform of the rule of law and the normalisation of relations with Kosovo. Another critical aspect is the investigation of war crimes cases and the political approval of judgments from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The EU’s evaluation positions Serbia between Montenegro, the evident frontrunner in the enlargement process, and Türkiye, which has opened six fewer chapters than Serbia and exhibits ‘backsliding’ in seven areas. As of the end of 2022, Serbia has demonstrated ‘good’ and ‘good-moderate’ preparedness in at least four key areas (see *Table 6 below*).

**Table 6.** Highlights of Serbia’s Preparedness and Progress in Meeting EU Recommendations

Preparedness	Progress in meeting EU recommendations	
<i>Good-moderate level</i>	<i>No progress</i>	<i>Backsliding</i>
<b>Cluster 1</b> – one area: Market economy. <b>Cluster 2</b> – 2 areas: Company law; IPR <b>Cluster 4</b> – one area: Transport	<b>Cluster 1</b> – 2 areas: Freedom of expression; Public procurement. <b>Cluster 5</b> – one area: Regional. <b>Cluster 6</b> – one area: External relations.	<b>Cluster 6</b> – one area: Foreign Policy.

Source: Author’s Compilation Based on Content Analysis of EU 2022 Enlargement Package Reports for Serbia

**North Macedonia / Accession negotiations 2022:** In contrast to other Western Balkan candidates, North Macedonia’s accession process has been marked by fragmentation due to tensions in its relationships with neighbouring countries, Greece<sup>26</sup> and Bulgaria. These tensions revolved around disputes concerning the country’s name and the rights of the Bulgarian minority, respectively. This particular situation underscores the significance of establishing, nurturing, and sustaining positive neighbourly re-

lations with existing EU MSs. It also highlights the importance of preventing the exploitation of the accession dialogue as a bargaining tool by certain EU MSs against specific candidate states. In the 2022 evaluation<sup>27</sup>, North Macedonia has exhibited a ‘good’ level of preparedness in six areas. However, unlike the frontrunners Montenegro and Serbia, North Macedonia has two areas where readiness is still at an ‘early stage’ (see *Table 7 below*).

**Table 7.** Highlights of North Macedonia’s Preparedness and Progress in Meeting EU Recommendations

Preparedness	Progress in meeting EU recommendations	
<i>Good level</i>	<i>Early stage</i>	<i>No progress</i>
<b>Cluster 1 – one area:</b> Market economy. <b>Cluster 2 – one area:</b> Company law. <b>Cluster 3 – 2 areas:</b> Science and research ( <i>Science</i> ); Customs. <b>Cluster 4 – one area:</b> TEN <b>Cluster 5 – one area:</b> Food safety, veterinary, and phytosanitary measures ( <i>Food safety</i> ). <b>Cluster 6 – one area:</b> Foreign policy.	<b>Cluster 2 – one area:</b> Workers. <b>Cluster 5 – one area:</b> Budgetary.	<b>Cluster 2 – 3 areas:</b> Workers; IPR; Competition policy ( <i>Competition</i> ). <b>Cluster 5 – one area:</b> Regional.

Source: Author’s Compilation Based on Content Analysis of EU 2022 Enlargement Package Reports for North Macedonia



**Albania / Accession negotiations 2020:** Albania is placed in a positive trend in the accession process. However, it encounters shortcomings related to delayed legislation adoption, weak enforcement, and insufficient institutional capacity adjustments. The EU has allocated 82.6 million euros<sup>28</sup> for the 2022 period to support Albania in various reform areas that are monitored as part of the accession process. These areas include the evaluation of judges, water management supply, youth initiatives, and more. Based on the EU's 2022 indicators<sup>29</sup>, Albania falls between

North Macedonia and Kosovo concerning areas with a 'good-moderate' level of preparation. Notably, the two areas with good readiness are not associated with the *Fundamentals* or the sectoral domains, which are the primary drivers for reforms that have a cascading positive impact on the accession process. Despite having only one sector in the 'early stage' of preparedness, a reasonably satisfactory position in the accession process, Albania has displayed 'limited progress' in 11 areas pertaining to meeting EU requirements in 2022 (see Table 8 below).

**Table 8.** Highlights of Albania's Preparedness and Progress in Meeting EU Recommendations

Preparedness		Progress in meeting EU recommendations	
<i>Good-moderate level</i>	<i>Early stage</i>	<i>Limited progress</i>	<i>No progress</i>
<b>Cluster 6 – 2 areas:</b> External relations; Foreign policy	<b>Cluster 2 – one area:</b> Health.	<b>Cluster 1 – one area:</b> Statistics. <b>Cluster 2 – 2 areas:</b> Goods; Health. <b>Cluster 3 – 3 areas:</b> Digital; Taxation; Customs. <b>Cluster 4 – 3 areas:</b> Transport; Energy; Environment. <b>Cluster 5 – 2 areas:</b> Food safety; Regional.	<b>Cluster 1 – one area:</b> Freedom of expression. <b>Cluster 2 – one area:</b> Company law

Source: Author's Compilation Based on Content Analysis of EU 2022 Enlargement Package Reports for Albania

**Bosnia and Herzegovina / Candidate status 2022:** Frequent political disputes involving representatives of the Republika Srpska have disrupted legislative activities in the parliament<sup>30</sup>. Consequently, there is a pervasive lack of progress in implementing reforms related to EU accession, with many areas demonstrating either limited progress or no progress at all. In two instances, the EU pinpointed 'backsliding', specifically in the areas of *market economy functionality* (Cluster 1) and *economic and monetary policies* (Cluster 3). Corruption stands as a significant impediment, further exacerbated by the politicisation of institutions, which obstructs alignment with the EU acquis and impedes the effective functioning

of state institutions. Despite having already attained candidate status, Bosnia and Herzegovina's level of preparedness remains relatively low. It exhibits 20 areas where preparedness is still in the 'early stage', indicating the initial phase, which is a higher number compared to Kosovo, which has 11 areas in the same category. Furthermore, Bosnia and Herzegovina shows signs of 'backsliding' in two areas, and in 22 sectors, there has been 'no progress' in meeting EU requirements as of 2022 (as indicated in Table 9 below). This performance places Bosnia and Herzegovina behind the other countries currently included in the enlargement package, with the exception of the Eastern Partnership countries.

**Table 9.** Highlights of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Preparedness and Progress in Meeting EU Recommendations

Preparedness		Progress in meeting EU recommendations	
Moderate	Early stage	No progress	Backsliding
<p><b>Cluster 2 – 2 areas:</b> Free movement of capital (<i>Capital</i>); IPR</p>	<p><b>Cluster 1 – 7 areas:</b> PAR; Judiciary; Corruption; Fight against organised crime (<i>Organised crime</i>); Market economy; Coping capacity; Statistics.</p> <p><b>Cluster 2 – 3 areas:</b> Goods; Establishment; Health.</p> <p><b>Cluster 3 – 4 areas:</b> Digital; Monetary; Enterprise and industry policy (<i>Enterprise</i>); Education and culture (<i>Education</i>).</p> <p><b>Cluster 4 – 2 areas:</b> Energy; Environment.</p> <p><b>Cluster 5 – 4 areas:</b> Agriculture; Fisheries; Regional; Budgetary.</p>	<p><b>Cluster 1 – 6 areas:</b> Judiciary and rights; Judiciary; Corruption; Freedom of expression; Organised crime; Coping capacity.</p> <p><b>Cluster 2 – 8 areas:</b> Goods; Establishment; Capital; Company law; IPR; Competition; Financial services; Health.</p> <p><b>Cluster 3 – 3 areas:</b> Digital; Taxation; Education.</p> <p><b>Cluster 5 – 4 areas:</b> Agriculture; Food safety; Fisheries; Budgetary.</p> <p><b>Cluster 6 – one area:</b> External relations</p>	<p><b>Cluster 1 – one area:</b> Market economy.</p> <p><b>Cluster 3 – one area:</b> Monetary.</p>

Source: Author's Compilation Based on Content Analysis of EU 2022 Enlargement Package Reports for Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Kosovo / Potential candidate status:** Analysing the 2022 EU evaluation<sup>31</sup>, it becomes evident that the areas where the country has made limited progress can largely be attributed to the non-implementation of newly adopted laws and the establishment of institutional frameworks. The identified shortcomings are closely tied to the limited capacity to effectively enforce national policies, with a particular focus on the northern municipalities of Kosovo, notably concerning the *Fundamentals* within Cluster 1. Moreover, several setbacks in the country's economy have been further exacerbated by the concurrent effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing con-

flict in Ukraine, initiated by Russia. Administrative and human capacity constraints emerge as significant limitations hindering progress in these areas. Kosovo is currently the least advanced country within the enlargement package, holding the status of a potential candidate. However, it is noteworthy that while Kosovo has 11 areas in the 'early stage' of preparedness (see *Table 10 below*), the EU has not reported any instances of 'backsliding,' as seen in the cases of Türkiye and Serbia, both of which are candidate states with opened and provisionally closed chapters.

**Table 10.** Highlights of Kosovo's Preparedness and Progress in Meeting EU Recommendations

Preparedness		Progress in meeting EU recommendations
Moderate level	Early stage	Limited progress
<p><b>Cluster 2 – 2 areas:</b> Establishment; Financial services.</p> <p><b>Cluster 3 – 4 areas:</b> Monetary; Social and employment policy (<i>Social</i>); Enterprise; Customs.</p>	<p><b>Cluster 1 – 7 areas:</b> Judiciary and rights; Judiciary; Corruption; Justice, freedom and security (<i>Justice and security</i>); Organised crime; Market economy; Coping capacity.</p> <p><b>Cluster 2 – one area:</b> Health.</p> <p><b>Cluster 3 – 3 areas:</b> Social; Science; Education.</p> <p><b>Cluster 4 – 2 areas:</b> Transport; Environment.</p> <p><b>Cluster 5 – one area:</b> Regional.</p> <p><b>Cluster 6 – one area:</b> External relations.</p>	<p><b>Cluster 1 – 6 areas:</b> PAR; Judiciary and rights; Freedom of expression; Organised crime; Coping capacity; Public procurement.</p> <p><b>Cluster 2 – one area:</b> Health.</p> <p><b>Cluster 3 – one area:</b> Science.</p> <p><b>Cluster 4 – 2 areas:</b> Energy; Environment.</p> <p><b>Cluster 5 – one area:</b> Agriculture</p> <p><b>Cluster 6 – one area:</b> External relations.</p>

Source: Author's Compilation Based on Content Analysis of EU 2022 Enlargement Package Reports for Kosovo

Drawing insights from the EU enlargement reports for 2022, it is possible to derive the following conclusions regarding the lessons learned from the accession process experienced by both the Western Balkans and Türkiye:

*First*, the national political agendas and power dynamics often take precedence over other considerations, particularly when the technical aspects of the EU accession process dominate discussions. The absence of effective communication, ideally involving both 'harsher sticks' and 'more sweetened carrots' towards stakeholders on the opposite side of the process, significantly heightens the risk of de-prioritising European integration. In such cases, demotivation becomes intertwined with the exploitation of stagnation: as governments strive to avoid reforms that can affect their political interests while bringing their countries closer to tangible EU membership perspectives, the population gradually integrates itself into the EU through labour emigration, capitalising on the perpetual demand for labour in EU MSs' economies. This phenomenon further undermines the drive for reforms and the pursuit of EU accession.

*Second*, the misalignment of domestic policies with the strict requirements of EU enforcement can indeed obstruct overall progress in the accession process. Failure to synchronise these policies presents significant obstacles to advancing the EU accession agenda. This risk is exacerbated by incongruencies stemming from electoral cycles and the proliferation of competing policy and political priorities, which effectively relegate EU accession to a routine component of policy and decision-making rather than a strategic goal to be achieved within a defined time-frame. The absence of time pressure, along with a lack of public pressure, creates an environment of reluctance, complacency, and a certain level of 'comfort zone' for local elites who continually receive EU funds despite their inability to deliver tangible progress on the accession front.

*Third*, overlooking democratic deficiencies can indeed lead to a degradation of good governance and rule of law standards over time. This decline can, in turn, foster an environment conducive to de-democratisation within electoral and political processes. Consequently, the prevalence of Euroscepticism tends to rise, especially when the accession process exhibits limited progress. This dynamic initiates 'vicious circles' of de-democratisation and the de-Europeanisation of external strategic goals, particularly

within specific segments of the population and the political entities that represent them, with these reinforcing one another.

*Fourth*, the manner in which Brussels engages and socialises with local political elites, often without holding them accountable for their actions, can inadvertently foster a culture of 'free-riding'. Consequently, this situation may lead to nonlinear progress in implementing reforms, as local decision-makers attempt to externalise and shift responsibility for failures onto the EU bureaucracy. Such actions can reduce the political costs associated with falling short of EU membership objectives. Conversely, there are geopolitical tensions, as seen in North Macedonia's disputes with Greece and Bulgaria, which can result in the use of vetoes and the paralysis of the accession process. Similarly, disputes among candidate states or within the same country can negatively impact meeting specific EU requirements, as evidenced by the tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, as well as internal disputes within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

*Fifth and lastly*, it is crucial to acknowledge that crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine have had an equally, if not more, detrimental impact on the progress of accession compared to issues like domestic political polarisation, structural institutional weaknesses, and high-level corruption. Therefore, it is imperative to invest in strengthening resilience, which should encompass aspects such as bolstering budgetary support, enhancing institutional capacity, and fortifying regulatory enforcement capabilities.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This policy paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the existing EU accession procedures while delving into inventive strategies to bolster the EU's enlargement policy.

Central to this exploration are the challenges encountered by the Western Balkans and Türkiye during the ongoing tumultuous accession negotiations. Drawing from these experiences, the paper formulates proposals aimed at refining the accession process, both for the current candidates and for those, namely Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, to whom

the candidacy perspective was recently extended. To comprehensively evaluate the EU's enlargement policy, the provided analysis examines the underlying frameworks in this domain. It initiates with a scrutiny of the 'Revised Enlargement Methodology' (REM), followed by an exploration of enhancements proposed by the 'Staged Accession Model' (SAM) and the Franco-German proposals. This holistic examination provides a nuanced understanding of the evolving strategies within the EU's enlargement framework.

The EU faces a complex task of balancing momentary political considerations with long-term geopolitical strategies to ensure the irreversible process of Europeanisation within regions and countries encompassed by the enlargement package. Learning from the unpredictable paths observed in the Western Balkans and Türkiye, the EU is compelled to make difficult decisions, necessitating adjustments to the current enlargement policy. These adjustments are crucial to minimising the risks of slow progress, preventing backsliding, and ensuring that candidates are fully prepared to accelerate their journey toward meeting the rigorous standards of EU member states.

To achieve a sustainable EU integration that prioritises democracy and progressive reforms, key stakeholders in the EU, Member States, and the aspiring neighbours (both candidates and potential ones), must carefully consider the following recommendations:

- **Sustainability of reforms:** It is vital to align EU funds with the assistance provided by financial international organisations (FIOs). This alignment should be based on strict conditionality and short- to medium-term targets, ensuring a focused and efficient use of resources. A collaborative approach involving both the EU and FIOs is necessary to advance the rule of law, democratic institutions, and public administration reform within the 'Fundamentals' compartment. By combining EU assistance with that of FIOs, a synergistic effect can be achieved. The EU should adopt a macro-financial assistance logic, similar to its approach with third countries, where its support acts as a complementary lever to promote the structural reforms required by FIOs.
- **Realistic policy and political timeframes:** In the domain of implementing structural reforms, precision in planning and the establishment of practical timelines are paramount. The intricacies involved demand careful consideration of electoral cycles to shield against short-sighted strategies and prevent an undue reliance

on specific political contexts as we navigate our path toward accession. Overdependence on particular political situations can imperil our progress, potentially leading to stagnation or, worse, regression in our reform endeavours. It is vital to condition and synchronise the completion of specific structural reforms with the opening and closing of the six clusters. This strategic alignment can serve as a strong incentive for the national stakeholders in the acceding states, propelling both the overall quality and speed of the reforms associated with accession.

- **Enhancing reform implementing capacity by investing in the public sector:** Strengthening the capacity of public administration in the acceding countries is vital for the effective implementation of reforms. Both short- and long-term training programs for public servants in EU affairs should be coupled with significant reforms in public sector salaries. This dual approach not only prevents staff turnover but also attracts a skilled workforce, countering institutional memory loss effectively. Focusing on capacity building within state institutions, particularly agencies involved in EU operational program implementation, enhances enforcement efforts and contributes to the prestige of public servants. The assistance provided through programs such as TAIEX and Twinning to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia must be meticulously tailored to their specific needs as a fundamental component of the enlargement package. This customisation should include conditioning support on the implementation of merit-based selection processes within the public sector.
- **Fostering economic 'catch-up':** Addressing the structural deficiencies within the economies of the acceding countries is imperative to create conditions for an economic 'catch-up' effect. This approach not only mitigates poverty-driven emigration from the acceding countries to the EU but also bolsters contributions to national public funds (pensions, healthcare, etc.) while preserving the labour force essential for economic growth. Collaboratively developing tailored economic development programs between the EU and candidate states should aim to reduce economic disparities, mitigating potential future tensions between existing net-contributing member states, whose number is reducing, and the influx of newer, economically challenged countries. Special attention must be given to synchronising Ukraine's accession agenda with the post-war reconstruction of the economy and the state.



- **Proactively Managing Political Crises and Polarisation:** EU institutions should commit to playing an honest broker role during political crises and episodes of polarisation, especially during electoral or post-electoral decision-making processes in acceding countries. By adopting a neutral position and engaging with all sides through negotiations conducted by EU Delegations in these countries, the EU can significantly contribute to consensus-building. Additionally, these mediation efforts can be utilised as part of public diplomacy in the acceding countries to enhance the popularity of European integration, preparing the population for a positive vote in a referendum regarding EU accession.
- **Prioritising enforcement pillars:** Shifting focus from the mere adoption of laws to their practical application and legal impact is essential. The EU must conduct objective assessments of the agencies responsible for regulating key sectors (public procurement, state aid, competition, energy, anti-corruption, public property, etc.). Additionally, strict negative conditionality (sanctions) should be applied to reforms related to the functioning of the judiciary. Instances of political interference in the rule of law reform should be promptly identified and penalised by the EU, including the suspension and subsequent limitation of access to pre-accession funds if decision-makers fail to address deficiencies. Monitoring and evaluating civil society organisations can provide early indicators, while input from opposition groups and independent experts should also be considered to track the progress of reforms. A robust judiciary sector can catalyse economic 'catch-up' in the acceding countries, attracting more investments and fostering sustainable economic growth. Additionally, it can help mitigate potential opposition against the enlargement within EU member states.
- **Building geopolitical risk management capacities:** Managing and mitigating geopolitical risks, such as disputes between EU member states and acceding countries (e.g., North Macedonia-Greece and Bulgaria disputes) or conflicts within the enlargement package (e.g., Kosovo-Serbia disputes), is essential to eliminate political irritants from the accession process. The EU must actively seek solutions to address territorial disputes and country-to-country conflicts among Eastern European aspirants. Contentious topics might include territorial separatism, border demarcation, and shared natural resources management (e.g., rivers). Addressing these issues requires a proactive approach to managing geopolitical risks. Addressing the pervasive challenge of managing geopolitical risks within the EU enlargement process involves confronting direct Russian presence (illegal peacekeeping missions and/or occupation forces) and remote influence through media coverage and non-state affiliates. Integral to the preparation for EU membership is a significant investment in the security of the acceding states. This emphasises the necessity for a complementary and coordinated approach, necessitating enhanced collaboration with NATO, its non-EU member states, and other Western partners (Japan, Canada, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand).

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