EU ENLARGEMENT IN WARTIME EUROPE

THREE DIMENSIONS AND SCENARIOS

Tyyne Karjalainen

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The enlargement policy of the European Union from 2013 to 2022 was not only ineffective, but also lacked an active enlargement drive. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine changed the equation of costs and benefits in favour of new members and gave the EU a geopolitical incentive to restart enlargement. Enlargement is not only a geopolitical strategy, however: it also requires successful state-building efforts in the neighbourhood. Moreover, it is closely interlinked with the EU's internal development.

This Working Paper analyzes the current evolution of the EU enlargement policy as it emerges from the interplay of geopolitics, state-building challenges, and the EU's internal dynamics. Drawing on original interviews with state officials, the paper also presents three scenarios for the coming decade.

The paper concludes that to achieve its foreign policy objectives in the neighbourhood, the EU cannot continue "business as usual" with enlargement. On the contrary, the policy of 2013–2022 needs to be replaced by a more effective model that encourages candidate countries to undertake genuine efforts towards democratic development. At the same time, reforms and compromises are required at the EU's end, including a solution to the dilemma between deepening and widening. Finally, the EU also needs to better address the security needs of the applicant countries already during the accession process.

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INTRODUCTION

When Croatia joined the European Union (EU) in 2013, few would have guessed that the rapidly growing EU would suddenly close the gates of Brussels to new members for the next ten years. However, although Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Türkiye had all been granted a "European perspective",[1] EU enlargement policy from 2013 to 2022 did not actively pursue enlargement. Instead, President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker declared in 2014 that he would rather focus on strengthening the EU internally.[2] The standstill led to decreasing motivation among the candidates to pursue eligibility for membership. What had been known as the "golden carrot" of membership conditionality – candidates implementing reforms to obtain membership – shrivelled in the absence of rewards.[3]

However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 changed the calculations on the costs and benefits of EU enlargement. When Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova (also known as the Association Trio) applied for EU membership just a few days after Russia launched its invasion, their applications were processed at record speed: Moldova and Ukraine were granted candidate status and Georgia the "membership perspective" in June 2022.[4] In summer 2022, the decision to open accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia was finally made, and Bosnia-Herzegovina was also granted candidate status. Furthermore, Ukraine and Moldova, for their part, expect a Council decision to open accession talks in December 2023.

The war gave the EU a geopolitical incentive to reboot enlargement. Enlargement is not only about geopolitics, however. It is also about state-building – a process in which the candidate countries adopt the EU acquis, create or strengthen the necessary state institutions, and implement reforms that improve the conditions for democratic governance and a competitive market economy, among other things. Furthermore, EU enlargement has implications for the Union's domestic development. It changes the EU's demographic, geographic and economic composition, influences its power balance and decision-making, and affects the distribution of resources within the Union. These changes need to be managed, and their management requires an agreement between the member states on necessary reforms and preparations. Hence, the geopolitical time pressure to enlarge as soon as possible is challenged by the reality in which reforms – both in the EU and in the neighbourhood – take time.

Enlargement will be one of the key issues on the EU's agenda in the next ten years.[5] This Working Paper analyzes the evolution of the EU enlargement policy as it emerges from the interplay of geopolitics, state-building challenges, and the EU's internal dynamics. Starting from the geopolitical dimension, the paper discusses the EU's past attempts at balancing between Russia and the Eastern neighbourhood,[6] as well as the implications of Russia's war and other conflicts for the future of EU enlargement. Secondly, it addresses the challenges related to state-building in the accession countries and the questions that the EU's internal developments pose for enlargement. Finally, drawing on this analysis, the paper presents three simplified scenarios of EU enlargement for the next ten years: one in which the EU is faced with an increasingly contested neighbourhood, one characterized by stalemate related to uncontrolled growth, and one in which the EU enlarges successfully. The analysis is based on interviews with state officials[7] and previous literature.

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1 The concept is used in EU terminology to signify that the country can become an EU member when it meets the accession criteria. Not all neighbouring countries have enjoyed this prospect; the Eastern Partnership programme for Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and three other neighbouring states indicated that membership was not envisaged for these countries.

2 Juncker 2014; Schimmelfennig 2015.

3 E.g., Bechev 2022 and O'Brennan 2014. See also Schimmelfennig 2023, Panagiotou 2021 and Börzel et al. 2017.

4 On the political process, see Żornaczuk 2023.

5 See e.g., Miettinen 2023.

6 Neighbourhood refers to those European states that are not EU members – Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye, Ukraine (not Russia). The focus of the paper, however, is on the countries that are pursuing EU membership.

7 The data consists of 20 interviews conducted with state officials who represent eight European countries and the EU institutions. The paper discusses general results arising from the data; individual interviews are not cited. To ensure that the interviewees could speak freely, their identity is not disclosed. The data was gathered as part of ongoing PhD research.

Figure 1: Map of Europe. The European Union and its potential members.
* In 1951, the six countries founded the predecessor of the EU, the European Coal and Steel Community,
and in 1957, the European Economic Community.

1. WHY ENLARGE? THREE DIMENSIONS OF EU ENLARGEMENT

The willingness of European states to join the EU should not be taken for granted. The United Kingdom decided to withdraw from the Union, while Iceland and Türkiye (de facto) have stopped pursuing membership, and Norway and Switzerland continue to stay outside. Similarly, both the Western Balkan and the Association Trio states host interest groups that are unwilling to pay the high price of EU integration. Economic cooperation with Russia seems more profitable to some in the short term than gradually removing barriers of trade with the EU. Some resist reforms that would cut their income and political influence. Despite this, for most candidate countries, EU membership is a long-standing foreign policy priority. This forms the basis of the EU's enlargement policies: the EU would not enlarge without the political will of the candidates to join it.

At the same time, the EU has no obligation to accept new members. After the "big bang" enlargement of the Union in the early 2000s (see Figure 1), a sense of "enlargement fatigue" pushed the EU to seek alternative policy solutions to advance stability, democracy, and European integration in the neighbourhood. The Eastern Partnership (EaP)[8] and Association Agreements were drafted to tie the neighbouring countries as close as possible to the Union without promising EU accession. These policies were – and continue to be – frequently criticized for leaving neighbours in a grey zone, vulnerable to Russia's influence and aggression. Furthermore, the neighbours were arguably less motivated to follow the EU's vision for development without the membership incentive.[9]

Next, this paper delves into the three dimensions of EU enlargement that explain what prevented the Union from growing after 2013, why enlargement was rebooted in 2022, and what could undermine the process in the coming decade.

8   European Union External Action Service 2022.
9   See Börzel et al. 2017.

1.1 Geopolitics with Russia

The geopolitical framing of EU enlargement policies explains why the EU did not enlarge before the war and why it might do so after Russia started its war of aggression in Ukraine.[10] Based on the interviews, several EU countries resisted further Eastern enlargement of the Union because they prioritized bilateral relations with Russia due to foreign and security policy calculations, or for economic reasons. The assumption that further enlargement could trigger negative or aggressive reactions by Moscow led to ambiguity in the EU's support for the neighbourhood and to deprioritizing the integration and democratization policies.[11] In hindsight, the EU's cautious approach towards enlargement was not, however, particularly effective in containing aggressive policies: Russia still considered the political development of the neighbourhood a risk and aimed to control it by creating instability, frozen conflicts, and eventually a full-scale war.

Why and how did enlargement duly change from a geopolitical problem to a geopolitical tool or objective? At least three factors can be identified as having contributed to this development after February 2022. Firstly, European capitals made a strategic reassessment: the expectation that peace and security could be achieved in Europe without enlargement became questioned.[12] As demonstrated by the speeches of EU leaders during the first year of the war, their rhetoric shifted from considering enlargement a value-based endeavour to viewing it as an instrument to protect the EU's foreign policy interests.[13]

Secondly, an attempt by Europe and the EU to remain relevant played a role as well: enlargement, in addition to other means, was seen as a feasible way for the EU to build a credible response to the war and to support Ukraine and other partners.[14] The EU was criticized (as often before) for not providing a robust enough response to the war, and the opening of the European perspective was one rather low- hanging fruit towards credibility.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the attempt to accommodate Russian interests in the neighbourhood ended with the war. The EU developed an extensive sanctions regime against Russia and started a multi-year programme to remove Russian energy from the EU market.[15] Institutional and political cooperation with Russia ceased and trade diminished. This context provided the impetus for a shift towards neighbourhood-first policies, perhaps for the first time in history. The durability of this shift can, however, be questioned. The withdrawal of Russia from Ukraine or a compromise result to the war could lead to at least some EU members rediscovering trade opportunities with Russia. If risks are not managed better this time, it could hinder the member state-building agenda in the accession states.

Importantly, the strengthening of the EU's geopolitical incentive to enlarge will not diminish the effects of geopolitical rivalry in the neighbourhood – on the contrary, the EU's more geopolitical enlargement policy needs to be applied in an increasingly contested environment. Russia's attempt to control the neighbouring countries is also manifested in the conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. These frozen conflicts have become more urgent, and potentially also more complicated to resolve, with the membership applications of Moldova and Georgia. At the same time, Serbia and Kosovo, whose bilateral dispute is not without a geopolitical layer, remain on the brink of an armed escalation. EU conflict prevention and crisis management tools are in use in the conflict settings, but Russia's involvement in particular makes peace-building difficult. Some escalation scenarios can possibly be prevented by supporting local peace processes, but complete conflict resolution without Russia – or with an unreliable and aggressive Russia – seems unlikely.

The conflicts are a major problem for enlargement: states with contested borders will find it hard to join the EU, as many member states are likely to be hesitant about accepting them. While Cyprus joined the EU under a partial Turkish occupation, the interviewees for this research emphasized that the situation would be different today, and with Russian troops involved. Ukraine most likely cannot join the EU before Russian troops withdraw from its territory: the member states would consider the risk of getting involved in a direct military conflict with Russia too high.

Even the integration process itself requires a level of security and stability to succeed. What type of security guarantees Ukraine receives and whether it starts

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10   However, some researchers studied the geopolitical turn in the EU's enlargement policies even before the war started, reflecting the endeavours of the "geopolitical Commission". See e.g., Petrovic and Tzifakis 2021.

11   See also Raik 2022.

12   See also Buras and Morina 2023.

13   E.g., European Parliament 2023; Elysée 2023.

14   Karjalainen 2022.

15   Siddi 2022.

a NATO accession process simultaneously can significantly shape the EU accession process and challenges along the way. In any case, given its limited military capability, the EU is unlikely to be the main actor providing Ukraine with security guarantees,[16] which makes international coordination for Ukraine's integration even more crucial.

Postponing difficult questions allowed the EU to grant Moldova candidate status with the Transnistria question unresolved, but it also seems unsustainable that Moldova would proceed with the adoption of the EU acquis leaving part of its territory non-reformed. There are also other unresolved political and territorial issues that have affected and will affect the enlargement process, including the problem that several member states do not recognize Kosovo. There are likewise unresolved historical disputes between Poland and Ukraine,[17] and Bulgaria and North Macedonia,[18] to name just a few examples of issues that most likely need to be addressed before the next enlargement.

Despite these challenges, EU enlargement is believed by the interviewees to contribute to peace among European states in general. Many pointed out that the Western Balkans could have been shaken by more numerous and active armed conflicts if the countries in the region had not been given a European perspective. Tying the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue to the EU membership process would be a good example of promoting peace as part of EU enlargement – but it would require the membership perspective to be credible and reliable.

1.2 EU member state-building

The state-building dimension of EU enlargement, on the other hand, provides another explanation for why the EU accession of Western Balkan states did not materialize during the past ten years and why the geopolitical relaunch of enlargement could fail in the coming years. Candidate countries cannot enter the EU without closing 35 negotiation chapters that concern the functioning of their state institutions, justice system, economic and competition policies, as well as energy, agriculture and foreign policy, among others.[19] Closing the chapters cluster by cluster

requires drafting and harmonizing legislation, reforming and creating state agencies, developing standards of good governance and democratic rule, and fighting corruption. Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova have not yet started the accession talks, but they have implemented similar reforms to meet the Commission's recommendations since June 2022 – and previously as part of their association agreements.

A branch of literature applies the concept of "state-building" to analyze this dimension of EU enlargement policies.[20] "State-building" typically refers to international interventions establishing or strengthening state institutions in weak or failed states.[21] While most of the candidate states of the EU cannot be categorized as failed or even weak states,[22] the state-building literature is helpful in clarifying the challenges that the EU faces in its attempts to promote democratic reforms in the neighbourhood. The key takeaway from that literature is aptly summarized by Bickerton (2009):

> While state-building may aim, at least rhetorically, to rebuild independent states, in practice it is more likely to weaken state institutions, or at the very least build political structures that are dependent upon international support for their continued existence. (Bickerton 2009: 122)

Due to this dilemma, students of state-building emphasize local ownership and domestic control as keys to success in state-building.[23] However, the EU's approach does not follow this model: membership negotiations are EU-led and EU-controlled from start to finish. Candidates need to adopt legislation that emulates the one in force in the EU, which can lead to a poor fit, limited practicability, resistance, and an increasing gap between formal and informal layers of governance. As Moravcsik and Vachudova (2003) put it, "the requirements are massive, nonnegotiable, uniformly applied, and closely enforced" (p. 46).[24]

Some researchers have referred to EU enlargement as "member state-building".[25] The wording is accurate in conveying the notion that in the enlargement process, the candidate states are being "built" primarily as

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16   Both earlier research (e.g., Gressel and Popescu 2020) and the interviewees in this study have argued that the absence of credible security and defence cooperation, in particular, has weakened EU policies on the Eastern neighbourhood. For a recent take on the developing division of labour between the EU and NATO, see Raik 2023 and Mustasilta 2023.

17   See e.g., Kasianov 2006.

18   See e.g., Brunnbauer 2022.

19   European Commission 2022.

20   See e.g., Chandler 2007 and Juncos 2012.

21   Fukuyama 2004.

22   See e.g., Rotberg 2003.

23   See e.g., Kobzová 2014; Grimm and Gross 2013; Gordon 2014; Zaum 2012; Solonenko 2009.

24   Previous literature also identifies many other problems and unintended consequences of state-building. See Richter and Wunsch 2020; Dandashly and Noutcheva 2019; Nilsson and Silander 2016; Kobzová 2014; Solonenko 2009.

25   Juncos 2012; Woelk 2013.

EU members – in relation to the membership criteria, under the supervision of the Commission and following a timeline set by the EU. The candidates' lack of ownership of the process culminates in the fact that they themselves cannot determine when they have completed the process – only the EU holds the power to decide that the "building" is complete and to welcome new states into the Union. From the EU's point of view, this cannot be avoided: weak state institutions and problems with the rule of law in the candidate countries pose an existential threat to the Union.[26] The struggle with democracy and the rule of law in Hungary and Poland has led to an acknowledgement that it is easier for the EU to sanction and prevent the backsliding before accession rather than after it.[27]

However, compared to other tools, enlargement conditionality has been relatively effective in supporting democratic reforms in the neighbouring countries.[28] While not without problems, it has managed to bind the governments of the candidate countries to at least some reform efforts, which is appreciated by reformist civil societies in the neighbourhood. The ability to support democratic development also has geopolitical relevance: member state-building is a tool for the EU to promote its values and protect its foreign and security policy interests in Europe.[29]

A key challenge for the next enlargement round will be to combine the geopolitical and state-building endeavours that follow different logics and a different timeline.[30] Compromises with regard to one might be detrimental to the objectives of both. Ignoring geopolitical factors might close the window of opportunity for state-building in the neighbourhood, but building state institutions in haste could undermine the foreign policy purpose of the process. The scenario exercise in section 2 reveals that there is a risk that reforms are implemented only artificially in order to pursue the geopolitical motive of enlargement. Moreover, as discussed in the previous subsection, the geopolitical context also creates challenges for member state-building: the most obvious example is that democratic reforms in Ukraine have to be carried out under wartime circumstances.

1.3 Developing the European Union

Finally, the third factor explaining the failure of EU enlargement during the past ten years stems from internal disagreements on the preferred shape and purpose of the EU. Perhaps the most fundamental debate concerns the question of whether the Union should grow in size or deepen integration among the existing members instead.[31] The two are not mutually exclusive objectives: previous waves of enlargement have catalyzed EU reforms that enabled further integration.[32] However, the juxtaposition of deepening and widening remains on the table because the EU member states disagree on the topic.[33] Moreover, there are tradeoffs between the two: the more members the Union hosts, the more diverse its membership will be in terms of national interests, historical experiences, economic structures and special characteristics of law and culture. Developing supranational elements of governance can prove difficult without enough shared interests and common ground. Intergovernmental cooperation between the member states may also face substantial challenges if mutually acceptable bargains cannot be reached.

This challenge leads to the debate on the EU's capacity to absorb new members.[34] If the Association Trio and all the Western Balkan states became EU members, the EU population of 448 million people would increase by approximately 13.7%. Ukrainians alone would increase it by approximately 8.5% to 486 million.[35] Ukraine joining the Union would make the European Parliament seat number exceed its Treaty-based limit, if seats were not cut from other member states. Furthermore, the right of each member state to nominate one Commissioner would overcrowd the Commission.[36] Every new member means that there is a potential new veto player in the European Council and EU Council when decisions require unanimity. This poses a problem for the EU's already limited ability to make decisions on sensitive topics, such as foreign and security policy, EU funding, or further transfers of competences. New members would also change the balance of voting

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26   See Wyatt 2023.

27   See Sedelmeier 2014.

28   See Börzel et al. 2017, Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008, Freyburg et al. 2009.

29   Some prior literature has even criticized the EU for not recognizing the (geopolitical) power that it projects to the neighbourhood as part of the state-building process. Chandler 2007.

30   See also Schimmelfenning 2023 and Tamminen 2023.

31   Kelemen, Menon and Slapin 2014; Hobolt 2014; Schneider 2014; Heidbreder 2014.

32   In addition to ibid., see Freudenstein 1998.

33   E.g., Miettinen 2023; Bourgery-Gonse 2022. See also Von der Leyen 2023.

34   E.g., Lehne 2023.

35   These are estimates by the author and they may be inaccurate among others due to the difficulty in assessing Ukraine's population during the war. Populations by country: the World Bank.

36   von Ondarza 2022.

under the qualified majority voting rule, under which about 80% of EU legislation is adopted.[37]

To accommodate these figures, the Commission, several large member states as well as many scholars consider EU reforms a necessity – either in the form of opening the Treaties or at the level of secondary law. Reforms are demanded to protect EU decision-making from stalemates, to support the functioning of the EU institutions, and to strengthen democracy at the EU level. The proposed amendments include increasing the role of qualified majority voting, decreasing the number of Commissioners, and restructuring seats in the Parliament. The difficulty of the reform process and the political risks involved have, however, made some member states oppose a treaty reform in principle. Others argue that the window of opportunity for opening the Treaties should be used, since reforms become even more difficult to agree on after accepting more members.[38]

The second key problem regarding the EU's absorption capacity that needs to be resolved before the next enlargement round is an economic one. Some analyses suggest that growing by nine members with an unchanged budget would give Ukraine 41.7% of EU funds. At the same time, Spain, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Estonia, and Cyprus would all transform from net receivers to net payers.[39] Other studies argue that these estimates are exaggerated, and that Ukraine's economic integration looks "manageable".[40] While the economic integration of smaller candidate countries does not pose similar challenges, the successful management of Ukraine's reconstruction and economic integration is one of the key questions for the EU in the near future.

To avoid sending the wrong signals, the EU cannot rule out the possibility that some candidates will complete the membership talks before 2034. This means that their EU integration must already be taken into account in the planning of the next Multi-annual Financial Framework (2028–2034). One particularly challenging task is to prepare for the absorption of Ukraine's agricultural sector into the joint policies, which might require a major EU agricultural policy reform. The grain dispute in 2023 between Ukraine, Poland and a few other EU members demonstrates that even Ukraine's closest allies could resort to

protectionist policies if their domestic production becomes endangered, and the stakes will be higher when it is time to negotiate the EU budget.

In addition to the institutional and economic preparations, scholars have recently paid attention to one larger-scale policy solution to accommodate the increasing divergence in the EU membership: differentiated integration.[41] It suggests that not all members of the Union need to cooperate to the same extent or integrate at the same pace in every policy area.[42] Differentiation has already materialized: for instance, not all members have adopted the joint currency and some remain outside the Schengen area. Furthermore, non-members already participate in some areas of EU cooperation: for example, Ukraine already contributes to the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) operations and missions and the EU battlegroups.[43]

Recent initiatives apply the idea of differentiated integration to develop the EU enlargement method in a more flexible direction: candidates could access the EU sector by sector, after having implemented reforms and harmonized the legislation involved. This model of gradual accession would reward candidates throughout the process and facilitate deepening integration within the core of the EU while simultaneously integrating new members into the overlapping circles.[44] The initiative is aligned with the recent revision of the accession methodology that divided the negotiating chapters into clusters,[45] but the cluster system could be further utilized to develop a gradual integration.

Finally, there is new political will to overcome the disputes about the EU's future direction and to increase the capacity of the EU to grow. At the same time, disagreement over treaty reform in particular could delay enlargement if a compromise cannot be reached in due course. This issue was highlighted by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her September 2023 State of the Union address, where she argued that "we cannot – and we should not – wait for Treaty change to move ahead with enlargement".[46] In

37   The Council of the EU.

38   Müller 2023; see also ibid. and Lehne 2023.

39   Bastasin 2023.

40   Emerson 2023.

41   E.g., Klose et al. 2023; Bellamy et al. 2022; Siddi et al. 2022; Vinturis 2022. See also several recent Horizon projects on differentiated cooperation: EU Differentiation, Dominance and Democracy (EU3D), Integrating Diversity in the European Union (InDivEU), and EU Integration and Differentiation for Effectiveness and Accountability (EU IDEA).

42   The literature is not unanimous on whether the differentiation is likely to be temporary and lead to unified integration eventually (which would be referred to as a "multi-speed Union"), or whether the "islands of cooperation" are likely to be more permanent and potentially cause fragmentation.

43   Kempin 2023.

44   Emerson et al. 2021.

45   Commission 2022.

46   Von der Leyen 2023.

August 2023, EU Council President Charles Michel in turn had declared that the EU should be prepared to enlarge by 2030, but the timeline was not unanimously supported.[47]

Next, the paper considers alternative scenarios of what could be reached in the next ten years, taking into account the three overlapping dimensions of EU enlargement.

2. WHERE TO FROM HERE? THREE SCENARIOS FOR THE COMING DECADE

Irrespective of whether the 2030 target date for enlargement is achievable, EU policies can help or hinder the process in the years ahead. To simplify and concretize the analysis above, the paper distinguishes three scenarios of EU enlargement and envisions steps for the EU towards each end-state. The aim of the exercise is not to argue that certain political decisions would automatically lead to these outcomes, and the roadmaps do not consider all factors and actors that affect developments in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. Moreover, the exercise does not propose that the EU could be on the driver's seat in the development of the candidate countries: on the contrary, the EU can only support processes that are inherently domestic in nature. The exercise also sidelines the fact that a mixture of these scenarios – combining some elements of each – could be even more likely to materialize than any of the individual sketches. The objective, however, is to analytically delineate how the EU's action (or inaction) may contribute to the realization of different alternative futures of enlargement, all of which are plausible.

2.1 Increasingly contested neighbourhood

Scenario 1: Increasingly contested neighbourhood. Some neighbouring countries stop pursuing EU accession and seek political and economic support elsewhere. The EU needs to cope with a more autocratic and less cooperative neighbourhood. Those neighbours that remain committed to EU accession are exposed to increasing regional tensions and interference, complicating their accession. The increasing Russian influence could re-escalate frozen conflicts or stir political unrest in the Western Balkans, Georgia, and Moldova, potentially causing regional spillover effects.

Roadmap to Scenario 1: Continue business as usual – namely the enlargement policy of 2013–2022. Enlargement of the Union is postponed so long that at least some candidates lose hope and interest.

Based on past experiences, EU candidate countries cannot rely on their European perspective. Enlargement is decided by the member states, and the EU institutions have no control over how EU enlargement will be viewed by the national governments of EU members in five or ten years. Several analysts have

Figure 2. Map for scenario 1. The EU engages with increasingly contested neighborhood.

already labelled the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova as "symbolic acts" or "symbolic gestures".[48] The symbolism might lose a connection to reality, as happened in the Western Balkans, where delivery of the European perspective has failed thus far due to lack of commitment on both sides.[49]

The following steps could contribute to this outcome:

- Some member states stick to a position that a treaty reform is a precondition for enlargement, while others oppose opening the treaties. Enlargement is postponed to maintain EU cohesion.
- After the war in Ukraine ends or cools down, member states rebuild relations and rediscover possibilities for economic cooperation with Russia. The balancing between Russia and the neighbourhood creeps back into EU policies, leading to ambiguity and unclarity with regard to enlargement.
- Political and historical disputes between candidates and member states are not addressed, and there is no political will to find compromises in negotiations.

Simply put, the roadmap imitates the enlargement policy of the EU in 2013–2022.

What would follow from continuing business as usual with the enlargement policies? The Western Balkan states in particular can no longer be incentivized to continue implementing EU conditions with diminishing returns. Without the membership carrot, the EU's ability to promote democracy and the rule of law in these countries will significantly decrease as other conditional instruments are not as effective. Assuming that other (such as internal) motivations to develop democracy in the candidate states are not strengthened, this could contribute to democratic backsliding.

Moldova and Georgia could increase their economic dependence on Moscow, if they are not integrated into the EU single market. Economic dependency in turn narrows their foreign policy leeway. Both states already host political forces that find political cooperation with Russia pragmatic despite its invasion of Ukraine. Russia can be expected to continue political, economic, and military interference to control vulnerable neighbouring states and

to use the frozen conflicts to create instability, with negative security consequences for the EU. Hence, if this scenario materializes, the EU should prepare for a worsening security situation, backsliding democracy, and increasing instability on the European continent.

2.2 The EU in stalemate

Scenario 2: The EU in stalemate. The EU fails in the distribution of powers and resources among its growing and more heterogenous membership. Stalemates start to characterize its decision-making. The fight against corruption in the accession states fails, opening channels for foreign influencing over the Union's decision-making. The relevance of the Union decreases and members resort to smaller ad hoc groupings to cooperate on sensitive issues. The four freedoms are shaken by insecurity and uneven rules and standards in member states. Some member states withdraw from certain areas of EU cooperation due to a negative cost-benefit balance.

Roadmap to Scenario 2: The EU grows without reforming. New members enter the Union unprepared or experience democratic backsliding after accession. The EU does not reform its institutions, decision-making or budget to accommodate large but weak accession countries.

Figure 3. Map for scenario 2. Stalemates characterize the EU decision-making. Members resort to smaller groupings to cooperate on sensitive issues.

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48   E.g., Matthijs 2022.

49   See a recent take on the similarities and differences between the processes: Anghel and Džankić 2023. See also Tamminen 2023.

Based on past experiences, the EU also needs to consider the risk that the reforms adopted by the candidate countries to meet the membership criteria are not sustained. The erosion of democracy and the rule of law in Hungary and Poland and the pendular progress in the Western Balkans serve as cautionary tales. At the same time, Russia's war has increased the geopolitical urgency of enlargement, with candidate countries in particular pushing ahead with the accession process to seize the momentum. In this situation, they may be tempted to implement vital reforms artificially to demonstrate progress.

For example, Ukraine, which ranks low in global corruption indexes,[50] has established a record number of state agencies, legislation, and strategies for fighting corruption in line with EU requirements, but their implementation remains incomplete and institutional performance is uncertain in some cases. Unconsolidated or superficial reforms in the candidate countries could pave the way for backsliding in the future. The international community could also fuel problems such as corruption in the candidate states with poorly designed support and aid strategies.[51]

Candidates joining the EU prematurely would come with several risks: the single market could be disrupted if the same rules and standards did not (really) apply in all member states; crime and insecurity could increase if some law enforcement agencies and courts did not respect the law; the EU acquis would lose legitimacy if arbitrarily adopted by corrupt governments and implemented with poor governance; and the decision-making could be blocked or influenced by hostile foreign powers through weak member states. These risks would increase if the reforms at the EU's end were to fail.

At worst, candidates joining the Union in haste could weaken the EU's fundamental values and those characteristics of the Union that made them want to pursue membership in the first place. Older member states could react through security-driven and protectionist policies, seek other formats to cooperate on sensitive issues, and suspend participation or withdraw from some forms of EU cooperation that have become too costly for them. The following steps could contribute to this outcome:

- Monitoring the implementation of reforms in the candidate countries is not prioritized by local or international actors.
- The EU does not reform decision-making processes and member state representation in the institutions before the next enlargement round. Resolving difficult budget questions is postponed.
- Heterogenous and weak states are welcomed into the Union due to geopolitical pressure without adequate preparations.

2.3 The EU enlarges successfully

Scenario 3: The EU enlarges successfully. Europe becomes more peaceful and stable through EU enlargement. Candidates accede to the Union as stable democracies. Their vulnerability to external interference and internal distractions decreases due to stronger state institutions, economic stability, and clarity over their international position. The EU single market grows.

Roadmap to Scenario 3: Reform. The enlargement policy of 2013–2022 is replaced by a more effective model that supports the commitment of candidate countries' governments to strengthening the rule of law, state institutions and democratic development in the neighbourhood. Old member states find a political solution for reforming decision-making rules and the distribution of resources in the Union.
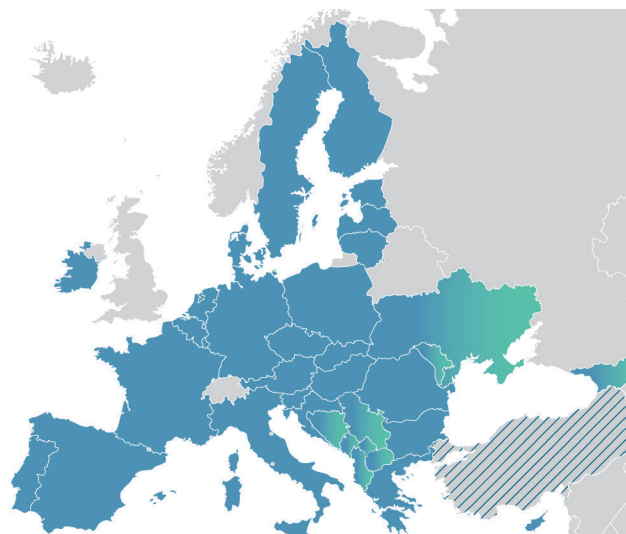

Figure 4. Map for scenario 3. The EU enlarges succesfully. Gradual accession could be part of the process.

50   Transparency International 2023.
51   Grävingholt et al. 2023.

The EU accession process is a unique opportunity to bind the governments of the candidate countries one after another to developing the rule of law and effective, democratic governance. Membership in the EU is also expected to bring economic dynamism and growth, as well as decrease the risk of foreign interference. The big bang enlargement of the early 2000s demonstrated what widening can give the EU: more stability and democracy in Europe, assets for European security and defence policy, and economic opportunities. Achieving at least comparable results with the current candidates in the next ten years is possible. The following steps could contribute to this outcome:

- The member states reach a compromise on how to reform the EU so that it can accommodate a more heterogenous membership – both in terms of GDP and political views. This is likely to include increasing the role of the qualified majority voting rule in the Council, the "phasing in" of EU funds for the acceding countries, and a major reform of the EU's agricultural policies.
- The credibility of the membership process is strengthened so that it rewards the candidate countries for progress by granting access to funds gradually and to decision-making sector by sector.[52] Differentiated integration allows current members to deepen integration simultaneously.
- Maximizing local ownership of legal and governmental reforms makes the process more sustainable. Local NGOs that exist to promote democracy and to fight corruption are extensively involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of reforms.
- The security risks and military threats that the candidate countries experience are duly addressed by the EU, NATO or other arrangements. Ukraine's EU accession is secured through adequate security guarantees in one form or another. The European Peace Facility (EPF)[53] can be used to equip partners while their armed forces are reformed, which allows for the mitigation of risks and the development of control measures. Peace mediation, conflict prevention and civilian crisis management are applied in post-conflict

settings to support the investigation of war crimes, local reconciliation, and reintegration in the conflict-ridden neighbourhood.

CONCLUSIONS

This Working Paper has analyzed the current shift in EU enlargement policies as an interplay of three dimensions: geopolitics, state-building efforts, and the EU's internal development. Russia's war has increased the geopolitical urgency of enlargement and awareness of the dangers of grey zones in Europe. Whether the EU succeeds in replacing the no-enlargement policy of the previous decade with an enlargement policy worthy of its name will depend on how each of these three dimensions develops.

The war has created a context in which the prioritization of the neighbourhood and enlargement might succeed better than before in EU policies. At the same time, Russia's continuing aggression may prevent candidate countries from joining the Union. Ukraine's full political and economic integration requires the withdrawal of Russian troops from the country – and adequate security guarantees for Ukrainians in one form or another. Providing ongoing support for Ukraine's defence is therefore a crucial step towards supporting its prospects for EU membership in the future.

EU enlargement could, however, also be hindered by unsuccessful member state-building in the accession countries. The sustainability of reforms cannot be overemphasized as the key challenge: neither the EU nor the candidate countries can run the risk that incomplete, unconsolidated or superficial reforms and poor implementation will lead to democratic backsliding in the future. While the problem of local ownership seems impossible to fully overcome in the EU-defined accession process, the EU should take a back seat as far as possible, and the drivers of change must come from within the candidate countries.

This is not to say that the EU has no responsibility – on the contrary, since the state-building map has been provided by the EU, it should be clearer and more trustworthy than the one used during the past decade. If there is ambiguity over the purpose of the journey, namely if the membership perspective is not credible, local advocates of change will find it hard to justify their decisions to citizens and political opponents.

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52   Emerson et al. 2021.

53   The EPF is an extra-budgetary financial instrument allowing the EU to fund the delivery of lethal materiel to partners for the first time. It has been used during the war to fund weapon deliveries to Ukraine. See Karjalainen and Mustasilta 2023.

The 2023 EU enlargement package, published in November, will assess for the first time the situation of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia against the membership criteria. While their progress is not as fast as local reformists had hoped, it should be enough for the EU Council to take the decision to open the accession talks for Ukraine and Moldova in December.[54]

Growing from a Union of 27 to one of more than 30 will fundamentally change the geographic and economic composition of the EU. Such expansion will also drastically alter the power balance, decision- making and distribution of resources within the Union. Fortunately, the EU does not need to navigate fogbound towards the next enlargement – on the contrary, lessons have already been learned to steer the process. The scenario exercise presented in this paper reveals that the EU should not continue with the "business as usual" enlargement policy of 2013–2022 in order to achieve its foreign policy objectives in the neighbourhood. On the other hand, a change of course regarding enlargement also needs to be accompanied by reforms on the EU's side. Starting internal preparations early enough is essential to ensure that the geopolitical window of opportunity does not close before the EU is ready for enlargement. /

54   Assessments on Ukraine's, Moldova's and Georgia's progress: Ermurachi et al. 2023; Stetsiuk 2023; Nizhnikau and Moshes 2023; Emerson et al. 2023.

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