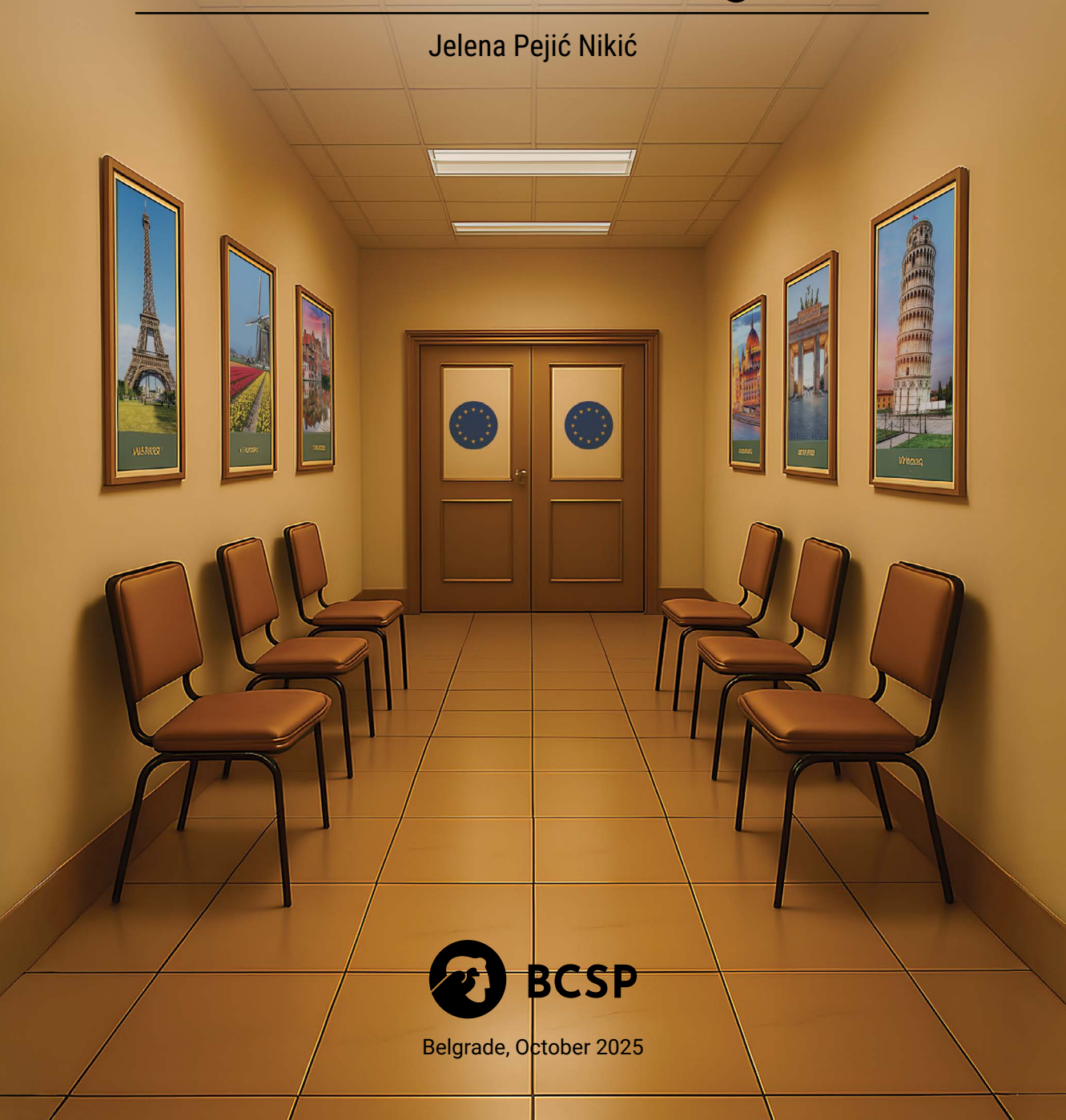


THE EU IS CHANGING, WE'RE WAITING

Western Balkans on EU Reform and Enlargement

Jelena Pejić Nikić



BCSP

Belgrade, October 2025

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Author:

Jelena Pejić Nikić

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Nikola Dimitrov

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Srđan Ilić

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SOLUTION

Balkan center for constructive policies

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List of Abbreviations

BHSM – Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, Montenegrin language

BiEPAG – Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group

CFSP – Common Foreign and Security Policy

CoFoE – Conference on the Future of Europe

CSO(s) – Civil Society Organisation(s)

DCFTA – Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area

EC – European Commission

ECMs – Enlargement Candidate Members in the EESC

ECtHR – European Court of Human Rights

EESC – European Economic and Social Committee

EP – European Parliament

EU – European Union

MEP – Member of the European Parliament

MFF – Multiannual Financial Framework

MP – member of parliament

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

QMV – Qualified Majority Voting

SEPA – Single Euro Payments Area

TEU – Treaty on the European Union

WB – Western Balkans

Summary

This policy paper examines Western Balkan stakeholders' perspectives on what is needed for meaningful enlargement and the EU reforms they consider essential for an effective expanded Union. Field research in spring and summer 2024 included 16 high-level interviews with representatives from all six countries of the region.

Frustration with the process has grown, with a perceived widening gap between formal EU alignment and (lack of) substantive reform. However, a wholesale overhaul of the enlargement framework is unnecessary as political will remains the key constraint. Since 2022, the geopolitical context has pushed EU decision-makers to revitalise enlargement, restructure administration, and unblock decisions on individual candidates. The new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034 offers an opportunity to align financial support with this renewed approach. However, this window of opportunity is seen as prioritising geopolitical concerns over the Fundamentals, with EU focus shifting eastward rather than towards the Western Balkans.

Interviewed stakeholders agreed on two key proposals: introducing qualified majority voting (QMV) for interim enlargement steps and fully decoupling enlargement from bilateral disputes. These measures aim to reduce veto points and protect accession by isolating the process from political disputes. The idea of gradual integration, allowing candidates to access certain membership benefits before full accession, has garnered strong political support but remains underdeveloped and unevenly applied in the two enlargement regions. Stakeholders warned that gradual integration must not substitute for full membership, particularly after decades of negotiations.

Enlargement remains tightly linked to EU internal reform. Each new accession affects the distribution of seats, votes, and policies within the EU. Ukraine, in particular, poses a significant test of the EU's absorption capacity. The EU must be prepared to function effectively with 35+ members. However, the internal reform debate has lacked momentum and should not delay further accessions. Montenegro has emerged as the most viable candidate, promoting "net-zero enlargement."

No official position on EU internal reforms has been adopted by candidate states. Stakeholders supported reducing the number of Commissioners or introducing rotating portfolios, provided equality is maintained. There was broad support for extending QMV to other EU policy areas, though strong reservations about its application to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) were expressed in Serbia. Interlocutors also highlighted the need for stronger internal EU mechanisms to safeguard democracy and the rule of law.

The role of stakeholders from acceding countries in the EU reform debate is generally marginal. While they engage in advocacy on enlargement policy, their input is often reshaped by EU decision-makers. Consultations have usually been one-sided, with limited space for critical input. Still, stakeholders agree the region should be involved in EU-wide deliberations. Regional influence could be amplified through a joint advocacy platform and deeper engagement in European political and civil society networks.

Recommendations

For the European Union:

- **Switch to qualified majority voting (QMV) for interim accession steps.** This would make the decision-making smoother and reduce the number of veto players and blocking opportunities, while ensuring a more predictable and efficient enlargement process. Decisions on opening and closing accession negotiations (but not each chapter or cluster) would remain unanimous.
- **Decouple bilateral disputes from accession negotiations.** Individual EU member states should be prevented from obstructing a candidate's progress based on particular national interests beyond accession criteria and EU values. This could be done by obliging parties to resort to available international law mechanisms – in the case of territorial disagreements, the parties could refer matters to international arbitration or the International Court of Justice, while issues related to minority rights and transitional justice could be addressed through the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) – or by introducing a QMV vote in the European Council to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate bilateral concerns unrelated to the Copenhagen criteria when they arise during the accession process.
- **Introduce new gradual accession incentives.** Gradual integration should offer rewards tied solely to the performance of candidate countries before accession, focusing on practical areas of cooperation that visibly benefit citizens. This must not in any case replace full EU membership as the final goal of the enlargement process, nor create second-class members.
- **Intensify debates on enlargement and EU reform while including regional stakeholders.** Engaging regional stakeholders more actively in discussions on both enlargement and EU internal reform will help foster ownership of the process and ensure that the perspectives of candidate countries are considered. Turn it into joint exercise on a vision for the common future.
- **Internal EU reform should not delay or prevent single accessions.** Internal EU reform should take place in parallel with enlargement. This will prevent delays in the accession process and allow several countries to join when they are ready without overstressing the EU's absorption capacity.
- **Commit to a budgetary allocation for enlargement.** The EU's next Multi-annual Financial Framework 2028-2034 should provide the financial support needed for both the candidate countries and the EU to implement necessary reforms effectively and allow the flexibility to cover the cost of the next accessions.
- **Effectively address state capture in the accession countries.** Deep-rooted rule of law challenges and entrenched state capture should be tackled through improved communication, strict enforcement of conditionality, and targeted instruments such as Priebe-style reports with concrete recommendations and monitoring mechanisms embedded in the accession process. To maintain credibility of these

actions and prevent post-accession backsliding, the EU must also strengthen and consistently apply its instruments for addressing serious breaches of the Union's founding values within its member states.

- **Enhance clarity in EU communication with the region.** A clear, more direct and consistent communication is essential in EU to improve transparency, foster trust, and ensure candidate countries and their citizens understand the reasoning behind assessments and decisions that affect them.

For regional stakeholders:

- **Foster a unified regional voice on reforms and show mutual solidarity.** To enhance the Western Balkans' influence in EU debates, governments in the region should work towards a unified voice based on shared interests. By strengthening intra-regional cooperation, states can collectively advocate for a more streamlined and effective enlargement process, ensuring fair and equitable treatment for all candidates, free from the constraints of individual political disputes. They should rally behind the hope for success of any candidate country, and jointly protest against blockages caused by misusing outstanding issues in the accession process of any one of them.
- **Intensify reform efforts to use the enlargement momentum.** The defining challenges posed by the radically changing global geopolitical environment call for unity, determination, and decisive action to consolidate the European continent and take more responsibility. It is high time for the governments to redouble their efforts in making tangible progress towards fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria. This would help their case with the proponents of enlargement among the member states as well, while undermining the spoilers of the process.
- **Leverage European political party groupings.** Political parties from Western Balkan countries should actively use their observer or membership status within European political families to shape discussions on the EU's future. This involvement will increase the region's influence in EU-level debates, ensure that national perspectives are adequately represented, while providing valuable learning opportunities. Moreover, being at the forefront of the debate could enhance communication with national constituencies and serve as a tool to combat disinformation regarding EU decision-making.
- **Utilise civil society expertise and enhance advocacy through European networks.** Civil society and academic experts from the Western Balkans should play a more active role in helping their governments navigate complex EU-related debates. Strengthening the involvement of regional think tanks in EU-wide civil society networks would amplify their impact, ensuring that the region's needs and perspectives are more effectively represented in EU policy discussions.

Introduction

The goal of European Union membership has always been a moving target, as the EU continues to evolve. More than two decades have passed since the Western Balkan countries were promised an EU perspective at the Thessaloniki Summit. Yet, since then, only Croatia has joined (in 2013), while the Union itself has navigated multiple crises, expanded its scope, and adjusted its enlargement policy. In recent years, the debate over reforming EU enlargement policy—along with discussions on deepening and widening the Union—has regained urgency. This shift has been accelerated by the new geopolitical reality shaped by Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine. A broad consensus now acknowledges that the EU must reform to accommodate a bloc of 35+ members, but progress on concrete steps remains slow and contentious.

This policy brief explores the perspectives of Western Balkan stakeholders on what is required for a meaningful enlargement and which EU reforms they see as essential to ensuring the functionality of an expanded Union. Field research conducted in the spring and summer of 2024 comprised 16 high-level interviews with representatives from all six countries of the region, encompassing a wide range of actors—official institutions¹, academics, journalists, opposition politicians, and civil society experts. We aimed to examine their perception of whether candidate countries have a voice in shaping EU policy reforms, how closely they follow developments within the Union, and whether they could articulate their positions in a single regional voice. The preliminary findings were presented and discussed at a Chatham House debate with stakeholders, held on the margins of the Leaders’ Meeting in Podgorica on 12 March 2025. This work complements research conducted in parallel in several EU member states on the same topic.²

Fixing Deficiencies of the Enlargement Policy

There is widespread frustration with the EU enlargement process across the Western Balkans. Many people have spent their entire professional careers working toward accession, yet the results remain deeply disappointing. The region's countries have made little progress—not only in formal accession steps, but, more importantly, in implementing the substantial reforms required for genuine transformation. Disillusionment with the process has grown, accompanied by a pervasive sense of disconnect between formal alignment with EU standards and the lack of substantive reform. This gap between rhetoric and reality shapes the prevailing mood throughout the region.³

Beyond Technicalities: When There Is a Will, There Is a Way

The interviewed stakeholders agree that what is needed is not yet another round of technical adjustments to the enlargement process, such as those introduced with the latest methodology, but a more profound shift—one that offers a clear and compelling vision of the EU's future with new members, accompanied by consistent communication and more effective decision-making. Successive revisions of the enlargement policy have, in fact, slowed the process down, making it more complex and less predictable. On the one hand, they have strengthened the “*fundamentals first*” approach, tightened conditionality, and adapted the negotiating framework to the ever-expanding *acquis communautaire*. On the other hand, conditionality has not been applied consistently, bureaucratic layers have multiplied, and member states have gained greater influence over assessments that were originally the European Commission's prerogative.

In the Western Balkans, the 2020 revision of the enlargement methodology was largely not perceived as a genuine reform. In retrospect, it functioned more as life support for a hibernating process that the EU was not yet ready to truly revive.⁴ Rather than breathing new energy into enlargement, it amounted to a face-saving exercise—buying time while avoiding difficult political decisions. The revision further delayed progress, as all actors needed to adjust to the new technical framework. Serbia and Montenegro were invited to adopt the revised methodology, though at their stage of negotiations, its benefits were minimal. Both countries nevertheless accepted, seeking to demonstrate cooperation and continued commitment to the process. At the same time, the change effectively postponed the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania for at least three years, and, in the case of the former, opened the door for new veto players to emerge.

However, it soon became evident that procedural tweaks or even well-intentioned improvements could not compensate for the absence of genuine political will—on both sides—to achieve substantial progress. This political will was, however, reignited on the EU's side after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which

fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape. The war in Ukraine injected urgency that no paper reform could ever match. The new context compelled EU decision-makers to revitalise the enlargement narrative and fast-track long-stalled items on the agenda.

In July 2022, North Macedonia and Albania finally opened their accession negotiations—albeit with reservations and only partially in the case of the former and comparatively swift progress in the latter. By December of the same year, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status despite not having met all previously set conditions, and accession talks were opened in March 2024. Kosovo was granted visa liberalisation in April 2023, which entered into force the following year. Montenegro, for its part, received closing benchmarks for Chapters 23 and 24 in June 2024, marking an important procedural milestone. Serbia, however, was unable to ride this renewed wave of enthusiasm. It made no tangible progress on key issues under scrutiny—most notably in the areas of the rule of law, normalisation of relations with Priština, and alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

Institutional restructuring and new appointments within the European Commission (EC) were also interpreted as positive signals for the future of the enlargement portfolio. Previously, several interlocutors had been critical of the outgoing Enlargement Commissioner, Olivér Várhelyi, who was viewed as politically close to the Hungarian government—a member state itself subject to an EU sanctions mechanism for serious breaches of the Union’s founding values. Várhelyi was widely perceived to have downplayed democracy and rule-of-law concerns in the EC’s annual reports on candidate countries,⁵ thereby weakening the normative pressure for reforms. The appointment of Slovenian Marta Kos to the post in December 2024 raised hopes for a more balanced and credible approach. With her background in the former Yugoslavia and fluency in BHSM languages, Kos is expected to bring a deeper understanding of the region and adopt a more critical stance toward persistent shortcomings in the *Fundamentals* area. Another positive development was the decision to separate the enlargement and neighbourhood portfolios within the Commission, allowing for a more focused and coherent approach to EU enlargement policy.

However, several interviewees observed that the EU’s administrative culture on enlargement has been stagnating, partly due to high staff turnover, which has weakened the Commission’s capacity to manage the process effectively. Faced with a proliferation of uncoordinated initiatives, the EU’s ability to monitor, condition, and support candidate countries has become increasingly constrained—especially where multiple dossiers, bilateral disputes, and technical compliance issues intersect. Without adequate staffing, coordination, and clear procedural guidance, even well-designed pre-accession instruments risk falling short of their intended impact, making it harder for candidates to engage effectively. Strengthening administrative coherence and internal support structures within the Commission would therefore be essential to restoring the overall effectiveness of the enlargement process.

Moreover, there is a widespread perception that the EU’s renewed interest in enlargement is driven primarily by geopolitical considerations—centred on security and economic imperatives—rather than on the *Fundamentals*, which officially remain at

the heart of the accession process. In Montenegro, the frontrunner among Western Balkan candidates and the country closest to completing negotiations, civil society watchdogs have warned that “substantial reforms are now being sacrificed for larger geopolitical needs,” with politicians doing only the bare minimum to preserve a façade of progress, as “everyone needs a success story.”⁶ Deeper rule of law challenges and entrenched state capture must be addressed through clearer, more direct, and consistent communication, the strict application of conditionality, and the use of targeted instruments—such as *Priebe-style reports* with concrete recommendations and dedicated monitoring mechanisms embedded within the accession process.⁷

Regional stakeholders also perceive that the geographical focus of the enlargement agenda has visibly shifted eastward, with new candidates from the Eastern Partnership attracting greater attention, while the Western Balkans risk being relegated to a second tier of EU integration.

One of the clearest indicators of political will for enlargement is whether it is backed by financial commitment, and the drafting of the new EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028–2034 provides a key opportunity to demonstrate it. The European Commission’s proposal of July 2025 elevates enlargement to a strategic priority under the *Global Europe* pillar, allocating €43.2 billion for all candidate and potential candidate countries. This represents a 37% increase compared to the previous cycle and introduces a more comprehensive pre-accession toolbox that combines grants, loans, and technical assistance.⁸ However, the specific share earmarked for the Western Balkans remains unclear. According to expert assessments, at least half of this amount would be required to meet the region’s needs,⁹ while Ukraine is expected to receive separate support through a dedicated €100 billion reserve. The new framework maintains the focus on rule-of-law and governance reforms as core conditions for funding, while also allowing for mid-term revisions once new members join—clearly signalling that the EU anticipates further accessions during this period.

Eliminating Vetoes Every Step of the Way

As for specific changes in the enlargement policy, the interviewed stakeholders expressed consensus on two key proposals: introducing qualified majority voting (QMV) for decisions on interim steps in the accession process, and fully decoupling enlargement from bilateral disputes. Both measures aim to streamline the process by eliminating excessive or unprincipled vetoes at each stage.

Under the first proposal, unanimity would still apply to the opening and closing phases of negotiations, while QMV would be used for intermediate decisions. This could be achieved by amending the negotiation procedures that are part of the negotiation frameworks with individual candidates if member states were to decide to introduce QMV in parts of the process. Although this legal route is relatively straightforward, and it definitely does not involve the “taboo” of treaty change, it still obviously requires a unanimous agreement among member states to be undertaken, making it an issue of political will. Despite the growing attention the idea has received, and the

growing number of member states endorsing the initiative commenced by Germany and Slovenia, resistance among some member states remains strong.¹⁰

The second proposal seeks to prevent individual EU member states from exploiting their veto power to block a candidate's progress as a means of exerting pressure in bilateral disputes. One option would be to require the parties to use existing international legal mechanisms for resolving such disputes. In the case of territorial disagreements, the parties could refer matters to international arbitration, while issues related to minority rights could be addressed through the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), a body of the Council of Europe.¹¹ Some interlocutors even voiced support for establishing a compulsory "Badinter-style" mechanism, which would provide a more predictable and depoliticised framework for dispute settlement.¹²

However, two key issues emerge. First, while interviewees believe that the EU could require acceding states to settle their mutual disputes outside the accession framework - thereby preventing future vetoes—they consider it unrealistic that current member states would willingly relinquish this leverage. It is precisely the latter scenario that poses the greater challenge, most visibly jeopardising North Macedonia's accession path. The European Commission, for its part, draws a clear distinction between these two types of disputes and continues to avoid directly addressing the latter, where member states use bilateral issues to obstruct enlargement progress: "Special arrangements and irrevocable commitments must be put in place to ensure that acceding countries are not in position to block the accession of other candidates."¹³ Second, the question arises – how such a mechanism would be integrated into the accession process. It remains unclear which stage would be deemed sufficient to meet the requirement—the initiation of proceedings before an arbitration body or court, the conclusion of the procedure, or the implementation of the final decision. Unless the process recognises the initial step as adequate for moving forward with negotiations, accession could face further delays, effectively undermining the very purpose of the reform.¹⁴

Another possible approach to addressing the challenge of bilateral disputes would be to introduce a qualified majority voting (QMV) procedure within the EU Council to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate bilateral concerns when they arise during the accession process. Under this model, a member state's substantiated claim would need to secure QMV support to be recognised as valid. In contrast, a position motivated by domestic politics, unrelated to accession criteria,¹⁵ or contrary to the EU's fundamental values would fail to garner sufficient backing, thereby preventing abuse of the veto. If the Council determines that a member state's argument is legitimate, it would remain part of the accession framework managed by the European Commission; otherwise, the member state concerned would be barred from blocking progress and required to resort to external dispute resolution mechanisms.¹⁶ For this purpose, the (European) Council could establish an Enlargement Dispute Resolution Mechanism.¹⁷

Accelerated or Gradual Integration: High on Rhetoric, Low on Delivery

One of the central ideas in the ongoing enlargement reform debate is that of “accelerated,” “gradual,” “staged,” or “phased” integration of candidate countries. The concept envisions granting incremental, tangible benefits to candidates by progressively including them in selected EU policies, funds, and institutions prior to formal accession. Some think-tank models even foresee a temporary post-accession phase during which new member states would be subject to transitional restrictions—such as limited voting rights or the absence of a national commissioner.¹⁸ Given the protracted nature of the current process, with no clear endpoint in sight for many candidates, this approach seeks both to reassure sceptical member states—particularly those reluctant to enlarge without prior EU reform—and to counter growing disillusionment among citizens in the region, by allowing them to experience some of the benefits of membership before the official “D-Day.”

The idea was vaguely referenced in the 2020 enlargement methodology, which promised “clear and tangible incentives” for reform progress, enabling candidate countries to be rewarded through “closer integration,” “accelerated integration,” and “phasing-in to selected EU policies, the single market, and EU programmes,”¹⁹ alongside increased funding and investment opportunities. Yet, four years and several policy papers later, the concept has been only partially operationalised in the long-awaited Commission communication.²⁰ Rather than presenting a concrete roadmap with budgetary projections, detailed steps, and policy revisions, the document merely reiterated existing instruments that could be used to support gradual accession. This underscored both the difficulty of translating ambition into practice and the slow pace of implementing such a model. Although the new Commission included pre-enlargement policy reviews and internal reforms in its 2025 work programme, this was the only priority without a defined timeline, and gradual integration was mentioned solely in connection with limited aspects of the single market.²¹

Some interlocutors expressed concern that the concept has become more of a talking point than a practical policy direction—something to sustain the debate rather than to deliver results. As time passes and circumstances evolve, the EU continues to generate ideas and engage in “soul searching,” yet with insufficient operational follow-up. They fear that years may be lost in developing this approach, ultimately overburdening the Commission and confusing the acceding states, only to reveal that the model may prove difficult, if not impossible, to implement.

All interviewed stakeholders emphasised that this approach must not become a substitute for full membership—particularly after decades of prolonged accession efforts. Some even questioned whether it truly serves the region’s interests, warning that it could further delay accession or institutionalise a second tier of membership. While they generally welcomed the idea of gaining access to certain membership benefits during the process, many strongly opposed the prospect of being deprived of specific rights, such as voting or representation, in a post-accession transition period.

Only two interlocutors viewed this as acceptable, provided it was clearly time-limited, reasoning that citizens would value access to the single market and the Schengen area more than retaining an immediate veto right.

Granting candidate states some form of observer status in EU institutions prior to accession is generally viewed positively. It could strengthen their sense of belonging, encourage mutual socialisation, and provide valuable functional preparation for membership through a practical learning process. This arrangement could also enhance the media visibility of both the EU in candidate countries and the candidates within the EU, an aspect often appealing to political elites. There were also proposals to the European Parliament to allow observers from candidate states, following Slovenia's example, which had sent delegations to the EP without voting rights in the years before its imminent accession. The idea was to calculate how many MEPs these countries would have if they were members and have them directly elected during European elections. They would participate fully, but without voting rights.²²

However, some interlocutors expressed doubts about effectiveness of such an approach. They pointed out that even within member states, public interest in European Parliament debates is limited, while observing Council discussions without the right to participate or influence decisions could prove counterproductive. A potentially more meaningful approach, they suggested, would be to invite candidate states to submit explained positions ahead of Council meetings, ensuring their views are at least considered. There have been precedents for such engagement: the Foreign Affairs Council has occasionally practised this, and candidate representatives were once regularly invited to informal Gymnich meetings at the start of each EU presidency.²³ Some interlocutors argued that participation in such meetings should be reserved for "mature candidates," as a reward for full alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), while others maintained that exclusion only makes alignment more difficult. Following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, EU leaders rather initiated a broader informal platform—the European Political Community—designed to facilitate foreign and security policy consultations with non-EU partners.

In the meantime, the EU has introduced several instruments that could be seen as elements of gradual integration, yet their implementation has been cautious and uneven across regions. The eastern candidates—Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia—have experienced a faster, more politically driven embrace of gradual integration due to the security imperative created by Russia's aggression. Their access to the single market and policy frameworks is expanding more dynamically than in the Western Balkans, where reform fatigue and procedural caution dominate. Ukraine, for instance, has been included in several EU policy frameworks such as the energy and transport markets, customs facilitation, and temporary free movement arrangements for its citizens. Moldova has also been incorporated into the EU's internal electricity market and benefits from deepened trade and regulatory alignment under the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA).²⁴ Citizens of Ukraine and Moldova will benefit from free roaming within the EU as of 2026, while a similar breakthrough for the Western Balkans remains stalled due to the absence of a clear legal basis.²⁵

The Western Balkans have been engaged in sectoral integration for years through mechanisms such as the Energy and Transport Communities, but these remain fragmented and weakly monitored. Recent EU initiatives like the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans signal renewed ambition but still follow a restrained approach. Although the Plan links new financial incentives to performance-based conditions, it remains heavily focused on the economy, and its methodological ambiguity and implementation delays have so far preserved rather than transformed the status quo.

Some tangible benefits have nonetheless emerged. Several countries—Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Moldova—have joined the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), facilitating easier cross-border transactions.²⁶ Since 2024, four negotiating candidate states from the region have also been included in the EU’s annual Rule of Law Report. Moreover, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) became the first EU body to formally open its doors to candidate countries by including their civil society representatives as Enlargement Candidate Members (ECMs) in its advisory work.

The Widening–Deepening Link: How to Prepare the EU for a Major Enlargement

Further EU enlargement is closely intertwined with the Union’s internal reform. For some member states, notably France, this linkage has been a concern even before 2020. The argument that the EU must first complete its internal reforms before proceeding with enlargement can serve two contrasting purposes: for enlargement sceptics, it provides justification to delay widening, while for enlargement supporters, it acts as leverage to push them to agree on long-overdue deepening of the Union. Since 2022, this debate has gained renewed relevance as the enlargement agenda expanded to include three new candidates—Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Each potential accession affects the distribution of seats and votes within EU institutions, the allocation of the budget, and the implementation of specific policies. Among these, Ukraine stands out as the greatest test of the EU’s absorption capacity, given its size, population, post-war reconstruction needs, and vast agricultural sector.

For the EU to maintain a credible enlargement policy, it must be prepared to function effectively with more than 35 members. France and Germany have taken the lead in examining what this would entail in practice. In 2023, an expert group convened by the two countries proposed an ambitious yet pragmatic roadmap to make the Union both enlargement-ready and politically resilient.²⁷ The group argued that the EU must deepen and widen simultaneously—strengthening its decision-making capacity, legitimacy, and financial resources while keeping the door open to new members. This would involve extending qualified majority voting (QMV) to remaining policy areas that currently require unanimity,²⁸ such as CFSP, fiscal and tax policy, in order to avoid the paralysis that could result from having 35 or more potential veto players. The size of the European Commission would be reduced, moving away from the “one state–one commissioner”

principle,²⁹ while the European Parliament would remain capped at its envisaged limit of 751 seats.³⁰

The proposal also calls for a clearer division of competences, a larger and more flexible EU budget—potentially supported by common debt—and stronger democratic participation through citizens’ panels and reformed European Parliament elections. Rule-of-law conditionality would be reinforced with faster procedures and automatic sanctions for systemic breaches. Finally, the non-paper envisions a differentiated integration model, consisting of an “inner circle” of deeply integrated members (the eurozone and Schengen), the EU core, a group of “associate members” linked to the single market and EU values, and the European Political Community as a looser, outer framework.

Although the non-paper attracted considerable attention, the debate on internal EU reform has yet to gain real momentum—particularly within member states.³¹ In June 2024, the European Council adopted conclusions outlining internal EU reforms to precede future enlargements,³² tasking the European Commission with preparing in-depth policy analyses by spring 2025 and the Council of the EU with continuing the work in June 2025. While the topic was absent from the June 2025 European Council agenda, the European Parliament held a debate on the institutional and political implications of EU enlargement, during which a Commission representative confirmed that work is ongoing.³³ The Danish EU Presidency has also listed internal reform among its priorities through the end of 2025.³⁴

However, there is no time to lose if the EU wants to maintain the credibility of its enlargement pledge—above all toward Ukraine. While the Western Balkans would not significantly challenge the EU’s absorption capacity, their accession would still affect institutional balance by increasing the number of votes in the Council and commissioners in the College. Montenegro has positioned itself as the most viable next member, promoting the idea of becoming the EU’s 28th state after Brexit—“the net-zero enlargement”³⁵ — a frontrunner in the accession process, small in size and population, with no major bilateral disputes, a NATO ally fully aligned with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy and already unilaterally uses the euro. Thus, Montenegro’s accession would not disturb the balance of power or budget redistribution or threaten the foreign policy consensus. A recent study estimated the net cost of its accession before 2030 at just €0.13 billion.³⁶ The region and the EU’s enlargement policy are in need of a tangible success story, and Montenegro appears to be the strongest candidate. The likely runner-up in the marathon for membership is Albania that has advanced rapidly over the past year, surpassing Serbia in the number of opened negotiating chapters.

Although the interviewed stakeholders follow the EU’s internal reform debate, their primary focus remains on enlargement policy, where their expertise lies. Many are so absorbed in addressing the challenges of the enlargement process that engaging meaningfully in the reform discussion feels distant. No official position of the candidate states on EU reforms has been adopted or published, though their Brussels missions have briefed them on key developments. Across interviews, most interlocutors agreed that the EU must adjust its institutional framework to accommodate future enlargements

and supported a parallel-track approach, in which enlargement and internal reform progress simultaneously. They cautioned, however, that linking enlargement too closely to the EU's internal reform timeline could create new uncertainty. Parallelism, they argued, should be backed by measurable commitments on both sides and reinforced through clearer communication to prevent perceptions in candidate countries that internal EU reforms are delaying their accession.

Regarding specific proposals, interviewees generally supported reducing the number of Commissioners and introducing rotating portfolios, provided that equality among member states is maintained. Some found acceptable a hybrid model under which larger member states would retain permanent Commissioners, while smaller ones would rotate. However, some were sceptical that any member state would willingly give up "its" Commissioner. There was also broad support for extending qualified majority voting (QMV) to the remaining EU policy areas, though deep reservations were voiced in Serbia about applying it to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Interlocutors also stressed the need to develop and apply stronger instruments to safeguard democracy and the rule of law within the EU itself. Doing so would send a clear signal that reforms do not stop at the EU's doorstep and would strengthen the Union's credibility when promoting democratic standards and the rule of law in the region.

| Raising Regional Voice in Shaping a Common Future

The role of stakeholders from acceding countries in the EU reform debate is generally viewed as limited and marginal. They are more active in discussions on adapting EU enlargement policy, but mainly through their own advocacy rather than through structured inclusion by EU institutions. Over the years, civil society organisations (CSOs) and think tanks from the region have contributed valuable analysis and concrete proposals to improve the enlargement process, while the role of state representatives in such endeavours has remained minimal. Although information channels exist, candidates rarely have the opportunity to shape or negotiate methodological changes, making their inclusion more symbolic than substantive, as large EU member states tend to set the agenda.

Some regional ideas have been taken up but reshaped along the way. The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), which includes regional experts, was among the few consulted ahead of the 2020 revision of the enlargement methodology.³⁷ Yet instead of genuine deliberation, consultations often become one-sided, with EU stakeholders presenting vague concepts and seeking technical input, while critical feedback is not always welcomed. The staged accession model³⁸ with partial regional ownership, for instance, was largely built on France's 2020 proposal and discussed with member states well before regional governments were consulted.

Stakeholders from the Western Balkans have not been included in the debate on internal EU reform to prepare for major enlargement.³⁹ While they try to follow it, the discussion often appears distant and overly technical, and it still needs to gain traction. Nevertheless, they believe that candidate states should be part of it, as participation would signal that the EU sees them as future members, strengthen enlargement credibility, and allow them to understand different positions and develop their own. It would also help communicate the idea of a shared European future to citizens. As one interlocutor put it: “At the end of the day, we are shaping our countries to fit into the EU, so we should have a say in how the EU should look. Not being included in these debates already sends a message.”⁴⁰

A positive exception was the conference hosted by the German Federal Foreign Office in Berlin in November 2023, which addressed both the future of enlargement and internal EU reform, and included representatives of institutions and civil society from aspirant countries.⁴¹ Interviewees also recalled the 2021–2022 Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), which, despite being disrupted by COVID-19, opened limited space for participation from candidate states through roundtables and written submissions. Most viewed it as a useful learning and networking exercise rather than a platform for real influence on EU institutional reform.

These rare experiences revealed deeper limitations to meaningful participation by Western Balkan stakeholders. Lacking direct experience in EU policymaking, many found it difficult to contribute beyond enlargement-related issues. Official representatives also face the delicate task of avoiding actions that might upset member states or force them to take sides in existing political divides, given that any member state could block accession of their country. Finally, loosely structured discussions on reform risks sending a discouraging signal that the process would drag on indefinitely.

Experts from civil society and academia from the region could help their governments navigate these complex debates by explaining technical aspects such as qualified majority voting, budget allocation, and institutional reform, and by assisting in formulating national positions. So far, their expertise has not been utilised even in addressing less complex EU-related matters.⁴² Regional think-tanks could also strengthen their presence in EU-wide civil society networks to amplify their impact. A recent positive example came when around 60 CSOs from both accession regions, as well as from EU member states, jointly submitted inputs for the EU Civil Society Strategy, aiming to ensure that the document acknowledges and addresses the specific challenges faced by civil society in the accession countries.⁴³

Likewise, political parties from acceding countries could use their membership or observer status in European party families to engage more actively in shaping debates on the EU’s future. So far, however, their participation has mostly centred on the position of their respective states and the accession process itself, rather than on the broader question of how the Union should evolve.⁴⁴

Levelling up to boost influence in EU debates could also occur among Western Balkan governments. They could work to establish a unified regional voice based on shared interests, perhaps in the form of an open letter or declaration. A successful example of this approach was a letter sent to the European Commission during the COVID-19 crisis, urging the inclusion of the region in the joint procurement mechanism for medical supplies.⁴⁵ Another option could be regular regional meetings, such as those between MPs from relevant parliamentary committees or foreign/European affairs ministers from the Western Balkan Six, where EU representatives could be invited to discuss the pace of reform and specific proposals. Such meetings would also help counter disinformation about EU reforms in the region. Regional gatherings of ministers for European integration and finance to discuss the Growth Plan and its operationalisation through national reform agendas were seen as valuable and effective.⁴⁶ Additionally, greater solidarity within the region is needed to raise the political cost of bilateral blockages against any candidate country, as such actions negatively impact the credibility of the EU enlargement process and, by extension, the entire region.

Although interlocutors generally agree that a unified regional voice is desirable, they have identified several obstacles to this goal. First, finding common ground is challenging due to the differing stages of the accession process in each country. Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, cannot contribute much to discussions on the negotiation process or EU instruments that are applied later in the procedure. Each country is focused on its own path and immediate next steps. Montenegro supports its neighbours but remains a “lone player” in its own case, promoting the concept of “net zero enlargement.” Second, there are significant differences in the levels of state capture and regime types across the region. While there may be consensus on advocating for economic integration, disagreements persist on issues like rule of law and democratic standards. This was evident in the Open Balkans initiative, which remained exclusive and competed with the Berlin Process. Third, Serbia faces particular challenges in any platform involving Kosovo. While it may participate, Serbia will not facilitate or host such initiatives.

Some have proposed seeking a unified voice among all accession states, but the differences between the two regions are stark. Eastern candidates have a very different experience and view of the process, driven by greater enthusiasm. In contrast, after a quarter-century of ups and downs, the frustration with the process in the Western Balkans has bred cynicism and scepticism. Nevertheless, a common denominator can be found in several proposals discussed in this paper, such as switching to QMV for interim enlargement steps, removing bilateral disputes from the accession process, and securing adequate funding for enlargement in the debate on the new Multiannual Financial Framework (2028–2034).

Conclusion

There is a growing frustration with the enlargement process in the Western Balkans. Only Montenegro and Albania seem to have used the window of opportunity opened after the Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2022. However, despite their rapid progress in formal negotiations, both citizens and experts have lost confidence in the transformative potential of EU integration. Reforms in key areas such as democracy, rule of law, and human rights appear to be sidelined by geopolitical considerations, while the focus of EU decision-makers has moved eastward. Acceding states need predictability, clear rules, and political will to move the process forward. Another round of revisions risks further delays and a “process-for-process” dynamic unless it directly reduces veto points, sharpens conditionality, and delivers visible benefits.

The concept of gradual integration—allowing candidate countries to access certain membership benefits before full accession—has garnered strong political support within the EU. Yet, in practice, it remains underdeveloped and limited in scope, with many fearing it will become yet another topic for discussion. Gradual integration could offer rewards tied solely to the performance of candidate countries, focusing on practical areas of cooperation that visibly benefit citizens. However, as long as progress is contingent on political decisions within the EU, responsibility can be shifted, and genuine motivation will remain absent.

EU decision-makers should engage bravely with mature proposals to make the enlargement process smoother by removing QMV from interim steps and decoupling it from bilateral disputes—both among candidate states and between candidates and EU member states. Their support for enlargement should be reflected in the next Multiannual Financial Framework.

While the EU must prepare for major enlargement through internal reform, this should not delay successive accessions based on merit. The debate on how to improve the enlargement process and prepare the EU for 35+ members should gain momentum and include stakeholders from candidate states for mutual benefit. A joint advocacy platform could amplify the regional impact on these debates. Even if this remains challenging in an intergovernmental format, civil society, academia, and political parties can leverage their networks and European political families to amplify the region’s voice.

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2. Tanja Mišćević, Minister for European Integration in the Government of Serbia (2022-2025), Belgrade, 1 April 2024
3. Strahinja Subotić, Senior Researcher at European Policy Centre in Belgrade, Belgrade, 1 April 2024
4. Adnan Ćerimagić, European Stability Initiative, online, 2 April 2024
5. Professor at the University of Belgrade, Belgrade, 3 April 2024
6. Jovana Marović, former Deputy Prime Minister and European Affairs Minister of Montenegro and BiEPAG expert, online, 4 April 2024
7. Representative of an opposition party in Serbia, Belgrade, 4 April 2024
8. Simonida Kacarska, European Policy Institute Skopje, online, 5 April 2024
9. Bojan Božović, State Secretary at the Ministry for European Integration Montenegro (2023-2024), online, 9 April 2024
10. Donika Emini, policy analyst from Kosovo, online, 15 April 2024
11. Engjellushe Morina, Senior Policy Fellow at European Council for Foreign Affairs, online, 24 April 2024
12. Petar Marković, Ambassador of Montenegro to the EU in Brussels, online, 26 April 2024
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14. Gjergji Vurmo, Programme Director at the Institute for Democracy and Mediation Tirana, online, 26 April 2024
15. Nikola Dimitrov, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia, Balkan Center for Constructive Policies – Solution, online, 22 May 2024
16. Representative of the relevant institution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo, 27 June 2024

Endnotes

- 1 In Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Interview requests were sent to relevant institutions from all Western Balkan countries.
- 2 [The Netherlands](#), [Estonia](#), [Greece](#), [Poland](#), and [Slovakia](#), with the financial support of the Open Society Foundation.
- 3 Pollozhani, L. & F. Bieber (eds) (2025) [Perceptions of External Influences in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood Countries](#). Brussels: REUNIR.
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- 13 European Commission (2024). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews*, [COM \(2024\) 146 final](#), p. 15
- 14 Interview with Tanja Mišćević on 1 April 2024.
- 15 See the link between mapped bilateral issues and accession negotiating chapters in: Steven Blockmans and Butrint Berisha (2025). [From Stalemate to Solution: Rethinking EU Approaches to Bilateral Disputes in the Context of Enlargement](#). Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, p. 28.
- 16 Srđan Cvijić, Nikola Dimitrov et al. (2024) [Bilateral Disputes and EU Enlargement: A Consensual Divorce](#). Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, pp. 15-16.
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- 23 Interview with Nikola Dimitrov on 22 May 2024.
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- 25 During her visit to the Western Balkans in October 2025, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that the EU will abolish roaming charges with Montenegro and Albania in 2026. Iskra Pavlova (2025). ["EU to scrap roaming charges with Montenegro in 2026 – von der Leyen"](#), SeeNews Montenegro, 14/10/2025.
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- 28 This could be achieved by invoking the *passerelle clause* under Article 48(7) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which allows the European Council, acting unanimously, to move from unanimity to qualified majority voting. Although this mechanism offers a pragmatic way to avoid lengthy treaty reform, it still requires unanimous agreement among member states to be activated.
- 29 The Lisbon Treaty (Art. 17(5) TEU) already envisaged a reduction in the number of commissioners to two thirds of the number of member states, but member states have so far prevented its implementation.
- 30 Art. 14(2) TEU.
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- 37 Interview with Donika Emini on 15 April 2024.

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39 Only Professor Tanja Mišćević, former Serbian Minister for European Integration, reported having been consulted by the expert group that prepared the Franco-German non-paper in 2023. However, she noted that the consultation was informal and that she was approached more in her capacity as an expert on EU integration than as a government representative. Interview with Tanja Mišćević on 1 April 2024.

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