

Background note

Session IV: Enlargement Policy of the European Union

Introduction

The enlargement of the European Union has been one of the key elements of its policy since the founding of the European Community, the foundations of which were laid down by the 1957 Treaty of Rome. This process, which started with just six Member States, has developed thanks to successive enlargement waves, bringing the number of members to a total of 28 (before Brexit). The first wave took place in 1973, when Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom joined the Union. Further enlargements took place in 1981, 1986, 1995 and 2004 – at that time, the Central and Eastern European states joined the Union after the fall of communism, and then again in 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania). The last country to join the EU was Croatia in 2013.

The legal basis for the EU enlargement is set out in Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which states that any European state which respects the values of the Union as set out in Article 2 TEU, such as freedom, democracy, equality, rule of law, respect for human rights, including the rights of minorities, may apply for membership. The negotiation process cannot start until all EU Member States have given their consent for negotiations to start with the candidate country in question (unanimity of the Council).

The enlargement of the EU is linked to the implementation of the so-called Copenhagen Criteria adopted by the European Council in 1993, supplemented in 1995 and further clarified in the conclusions of the 2006 European Council (the so-called renewed consensus on enlargement). According to these criteria, candidate states must align their political, economic and legal systems with EU standards. This includes the stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights, including minority rights, a functioning market economy, including economic competitiveness, and the ability to assume the obligations of a member of the Union and to implement the entire *acquis communautaire*. In its 2006 conclusions, the European Council emphasised that "an enlargement strategy based on the principles of 'consolidation, conditionality and communication, combined with the EU's capacity to integrate new member states, forms the basis for a renewed consensus on enlargement." The European Commission monitors the progress of the candidate states, making recommendations and assessing the implementation of commitments, which forms the basis for the conclusion of negotiations and accession to the Union. It is also worth adding that COM(2024)146 (final), the European Commission's communication on pre-enlargement reforms, is an important element of the renewed consensus on enlargement. Its importance stems from the fact that it clearly sets out both the expectations of the candidate states and

the necessary changes within the EU itself that need to be implemented in order to successfully welcome new members. The Commission emphasises that the enlargement process cannot be seen only as a unilateral effort by the candidates alone, but also as an impetus to deepen institutional and political reforms within the Union itself. Thus, the document plays a key role in shaping the future architecture of the EU and ensuring that enlargement is not only possible but also sustainable and consistent with the values and objectives of the community.¹

In line with the established strategy, every year the European Commission submits reports on the state of preparation of the aspiring countries for membership to the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament, along with strategy documents highlighting the challenges of the enlargement process. On the basis of these reports, the Council of the European Union adopts conclusions on enlargement policy and the stabilisation and association process, which are an important reference point for future negotiations and enlargement-related activities. Currently, nine states have the official candidate status: Albania (since 2014), Bosnia and Herzegovina (since 2022), Montenegro (since 2010), Georgia (since 2023)², Northern Macedonia (since 2005), Moldova (since 2022), Serbia (since 2012), Turkey (since 1999), Ukraine (since 2022). Some of these states, such as Montenegro, Iceland, Serbia and Turkey, as well as Ukraine, Moldova and Albania, have started membership negotiations, although Iceland suspended them in 2013.

Current challenges

In recent years, the European Commission has focused on strengthening its enlargement policy by increasing its credibility. Particular emphasis was placed on three pillars: the rule of law, economic governance and public administration reform. New approaches were introduced in these areas, including strategies to strengthen the rule of law and economic governance, which are based on the experience of the European Semester. The Commission is also proposing new ways to support public administration reforms in countries aspiring to membership, with progress in these areas being key to determining states' readiness to join the Union.

Reforms concerning the rule of law, economic governance, competitiveness and strengthening democratic institutions are seen as priorities in the accession process. In many countries covered by the enlargement process, public administration is seen as weak, politicised and has limited capacity, which hinders the effective implementation of reforms. Therefore, strengthening democratic institutions, including improving electoral processes and

¹ COM(2024)146 (final): <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52024DC0146&qid=1711363572926>

²Georgia issued a declaration of suspension of the accession process until 2028, which was noted in the Council conclusions of 17 December 2024. The Council stated that Georgia's accession process was in fact suspended.

functioning of parliaments, is crucial for the process. It is equally important to support civil society organisations that strengthen political accountability and foster a better understanding of integration processes.

The EU enlargement process is based on rigorous but fair conditions, which are defined on the basis of the principle of own achievements. In the context of the Western Balkans, there is particular focus on bilateral and regional issues, including the resolution of past conflicts. The integration process in the region, despite progress, still faces many challenges.

An important stabilising factor is the clear prospect of membership, which motivates states to undertake reforms. Financial support for EU candidate states is also important. Under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA II), the EU provides significant financial support: 11.7 billion in 2014–2020.³ IPA II focuses on priority issues such as democracy, the rule of law, competitiveness and economic growth. The introduction of a sectoral approach and an increased focus on results are aimed at the effective implementation of reforms and the promotion of infrastructure investments, which are key to growth and employment in the enlargement regions.

Ukraine, which is aspiring to EU membership, faces many challenges, especially in the context of the ongoing war with Russia. The conflict not only destabilises the country, but also hinders the implementation of necessary reforms, especially in the areas such as the rule of law and political stability, which are key to meeting the criteria for EU membership.

Ukraine (along with Moldova) faces problems related to corruption, judicial reform, protection of human rights and ensuring freedom of the media, as well as the need to build strong democratic institutions that would function effectively in spite of the ongoing conflict. In addition, the war affects economic and social stability, which complicates the implementation of policies that are required for integration into the Union. Despite these difficulties, Ukrainian aspirations can gain international support in Europe, especially in the geopolitical context, but the accession process will require great effort and determination to reform state structures, regardless of the ongoing war.

Questions for discussion

1. What are the main political and economic challenges currently faced by the Western Balkan states in the EU integration process and what steps should these countries take to accelerate the process?
2. How can the EU enlargement process affect the political and economic stability of candidate states, especially in the context of regional conflicts?

³ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/ipa-ii-the-eu-s-instrument-for-pre-accession-assistance-2014-2020.html>

3. How can the European Commission more effectively assess candidate states' progress on public administration reforms, the rule of law and economic governance? How do these areas affect the overall accession process?

4. What challenges do the new EU candidates face in terms of their membership aspirations? What changes do these states need to make in order to meet the requirements of the European Union, particularly with regard to the rule of law and political stability?