



**POLITICAL
INTELLIGENCE**

EU Enlargement: From Akhalkalaki to Zaporizhzhia

By Eleanor Doorley



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Introduction

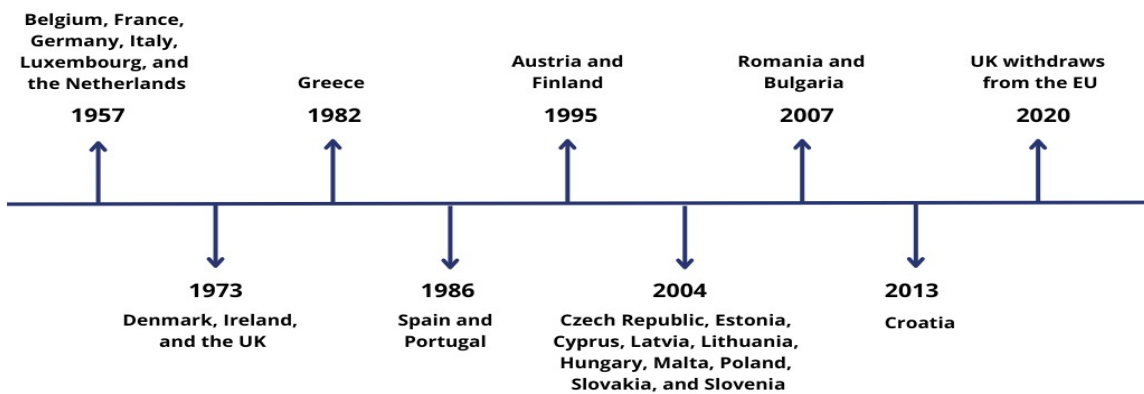
Russia's war in Ukraine has injected fresh impetus into the European Union's enlargement efforts, providing new momentum for as many as nine countries to join over the next decade including Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, and the six countries of the Western Balkans. Enlargement promises to boost the size of the EU's internal market and its presence on the global stage. However, the accession process is slow and arduous for the aspirants, requiring countries to meet significant conditions including judicial, administrative, and economic reforms. The prospect of a fresh wave of EU entrants also raises significant questions for existing member states, including how they might shift the power balance within the bloc and whether some will need to become net contributors to the EU budget after years as beneficiaries.

This Dods EU Political Intelligence report provides an update on EU enlargement ahead of a key December European Council summit where leaders are due to discuss the policy, including Ukraine's efforts to join the bloc.

Short history of EU enlargement

Enlargement is regularly cited as the EU's most effective policy and an unprecedented economic success, with the group growing from a club of six countries in 1957 to the world's largest trading bloc comprised of 27 nations and some 450 million people. But despite the economic, political, and security advantages of being in the EU, the process for bringing new countries into the fold has ground to a virtual halt in recent years. The last new member state was Croatia, which joined the bloc in 2013, and enlargement went into reverse in 2016 when the UK voted for Brexit and withdrew four years later. Democratic backsliding in Poland and Hungary have raised questions about cohesion within the bloc, although the EU's massive financial support measures during the Covid crisis and united approach to the Ukraine war have shown how effective it can be when it pulls together.

Enlargement Timeline



Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has breathed new life into the enlargement process. The conflict has given Kyiv and other capitals fresh urgency to join the EU to escape from Moscow's orbit, and raised the prospect of a larger and stronger bloc for existing members. In the months after Russian tanks rolled over the border into Ukraine, the EU granted official candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and opened the possibility for Georgia.

Within the EU, 53 percent (one percentage point more than winter 2022/23) of EU citizens support the further enlargement of the EU, 37 percent oppose it, and 10 percent do not have a view, according to the [spring 2023 Standard Eurobarometer survey](#) published in July 2023. However, some countries are notably keener on admitting new members than others, with more than 70 percent in favour of enlargement in Lithuania, Spain, Croatia, and Latvia, but only 42 percent in Germany, 35 percent in France, and just 29 percent in Austria.

2023 Enlargement Package

The European Commission published its [2023 Enlargement Package](#) on 8 November, its most recent annual report on the policy, including individual updates on the progress made by 10 countries seeking to join the bloc – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine.

The report said “significant developments” had been made on enlargement in the past year, and that “A firm prospect of EU membership for the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is in the EU’s very own political, security and economic interest and essential in the current geopolitical context.” The Commission recommended that the EU start accession negotiations and the adoption of negotiating frameworks with Ukraine and Moldova on the basis that they had both made significant headway on required reforms. EU leaders are due to discuss enlargement at their next European Council summit on 14-15 December, with some reports indicating they could give the green light to formal accession talks with Ukraine.

In Georgia's case, the Commission recommended the country be granted candidate status if it completed certain specific steps. The communication also assesses the status of the Western Balkans and Turkey, regions in which accession talks have largely stalled, with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Speaking during a European Parliament plenary session, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi drew attention to the laws and reforms that would need to be adopted by Ukraine and Moldova before accession becomes a possibility. He singled out the fight against corruption as a particularly urgent issue in both countries. The Commission will monitor compliance in all areas related to the accession negotiations with the aim of reporting back to the Council in March 2024, he said.

Preparations for the next enlargement constituted one of the main topics of discussion at the [informal meeting](#) of EU27 leaders held in Granada on 6 October. In a [declaration](#) issued following the meeting, the leaders said, “Enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity”. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has been a strong advocate for further enlargement. On the day of the publication of the 2023 Enlargement Package she [said](#) previous enlargement rounds showed there were enormous benefits both for the countries that join the EU and the bloc itself. She said access the EU's single market and four freedoms, the movement of goods, people, services, and capital, were powerful levers to increase prosperity and stability, adding “Basically we all win.”



Reactions

The political groups of the European Parliament welcomed the Enlargement Package, especially the progress made by Ukraine and Moldova, and urged the aspirant countries to continue carrying out the necessary reforms to be able to join the bloc and the EU to make internal reforms to be ready to accommodate them.

- *European People's Party (EPP)*

The European People's Party (EPP), the Parliament's largest political group, [welcomed](#) the Commission's recommendation to start EU accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova. It said there was no doubt that Ukraine deserved the move and called for the country to be granted membership before the end of the decade, provided that Kyiv implements all necessary reforms. Siegfried Mureşan, EPP Group Vice Chair and Chair of the EP Delegation for relations with Moldova, said that starting accession negotiations with Moldova was a welcome decision, adding that the soon-to-be conducted EU-Moldova Intergovernmental Negotiation Conference would be instrumental. "Our safety and stability within the European Union depends on how safe, stable, and better EU-integrated our neighbours are," he said.

- *Socialists & Democrats (S&D)*

The Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group [said](#) the candidate countries should make progress on the necessary reforms to underline their readiness to take on the obligations of EU membership as soon as possible. Pedro Marques, the group's vice-president for foreign affairs, said enlargement must once again become an EU geopolitical strategic policy. The group added that the enlargement process must also go hand in hand with EU internal reforms to make EU institutions and decision-making ready for an enlarged Union of more than 30 member states.

- *Renew Europe*

The Renew Europe Group [said](#) Ukraine and Moldova belonged in the European family, and urged European leaders to follow through on the recommendation to open accession negotiations with both countries. It also stressed the importance of the EU preparing for future enlargement without delay.

- *Greens/EFA*

The Greens [said](#) the new push for enlargement was long overdue, but must remain merit-based. "We count on candidate countries to implement the reforms they have committed to. At the same time, EU countries must muster the political will to live up to their commitments and promises and not stall the process for political reasons," said Tineke Strik MEP, Greens/EFA member of the Committee for Foreign Affairs. She added that the EU must not forget the Western Balkans and help restore trust in the region by sticking to commitments to countries that are delivering necessary reforms and offer them a realistic perspective for accession.

Challenges of accession

[Article 49](#) of the Treaty of the EU (TEU) sets out the legal basis for a country to join the bloc, including that it must be a European state and it must commit to the values of the bloc as set out in Article 2 of the TEU. The country must also meet the eligibility requirements, commonly known as the Copenhagen criteria following agreement on them at a European summit in the city in 1993. These include stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, such as the rule of law, a

functioning market economy, and the ability to take on the obligations of EU membership, including implementing EU rules and law, known as the *acquis*. The accession process consists of three steps: becoming a candidate for membership, formal membership negotiations, and joining the EU. All EU states must agree before negotiations can start, with the talks usually involving screening which assesses the candidate country's suitability in detail, and formation of a common EU position on the negotiations.

There is no set timetable for completing the steps, with progress largely dependent on how quickly the applicant can make the necessary reforms to align with the EU's rules. Sweden and Finland, which needed relatively little effort to adapt to EU standards, took about three years to become members in 1995. More recent joiners, like Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia took about 10 years. Turkey was declared eligible to join the European Economic Community in 1999 and started its accession negotiations in 2005, but has failed to make sufficient progress on many of the eligibility criteria.

"A Union fit for enlargement can be achieved faster", insisted the Commission President in her September State of the Union [address](#), stressing the need to move forward with discussions of how a 30-member strong Union would work in practice. But while myriad institutional and political obstacles remain for the countries that want to join the bloc, a larger bloc also poses significant reform challenges for existing member states:

- **Institutional dynamics:** New members will have an impact on the EU's institutional dynamics. The addition of Moldova and Ukraine to the Union would increase the bloc's population by approximately 40 million people. This would alter the distribution of seats in the European Parliament, where the national allocation of MEPs is based on population. It would also raise questions about whether new policy Commissioners should be created for each new member state, thereby increasing the bloc's bureaucracy, and testing its efficiency.
- **Budget:** Enlargement will come with substantial economic costs and require a significant redistribution of regional development and common agricultural policy (CAP) funds. Ukraine alone will require billions of euros for reconstruction and development. This means some existing member states that have been beneficiaries of EU funds for many years could find they have to become net contributors, a move which may be a hard political pill to swallow for governments. In recent years [Germany, France, and The Netherlands](#) have been the three biggest net contributors, while Poland, Greece, and Hungary were the three biggest net beneficiaries. Countries that are only just net beneficiaries, like Malta, Cyprus, Slovenia, Estonia, and Latvia, are likely to have to start paying more money into the EU budget than they get in return.
- **CAP:** If Ukraine, an agricultural powerhouse, joins the EU it is likely to cause a fundamental shift in the bloc's farming subsidy system. This is likely to be politically sensitive in countries with substantial agriculture sectors including France. [Ukraine's grain exports](#) account for 10 percent of the world wheat market, 15 percent of the corn market, and 13 percent of the barley market. The German Farmers' Association (DBV) has warned that Ukraine's accession, with its large-scale agricultural system, would lead to the demise of family farming in Europe. However, having Ukraine inside the European club is likely to be a huge boost to the EU's food security and self-sufficiency and may also give the bloc added weight in trade negotiations.

- **Values:** A new wave of entrants could bring fresh challenges for ensuring adherence to the bloc's democratic values and standards, including the rule of law. The EU is already having trouble ensuring Hungary and Poland toe the line. A [paper](#) released by a group of experts commissioned by the French and German governments in September suggested that if there is further enlargement governments should face tougher conditions to observe the rule of law and EU values to get EU funds.
- **Unanimity:** The requirement for unanimity among member states on enlargement decisions means they risk becoming bargaining chips for European capitals to push for concessions in other areas. According to reports, Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán has threatened to block enlargement talks with Ukraine, and European aid for the country, unless there is a full review of the bloc's strategy towards the war-torn country. Analysts say the move aims to ramp up pressure on Brussels to release billions of euros of funds that have been held back from Hungary over rule of law concerns.
- **Migration:** Enlargement would raise new migration challenges for the Union's policymakers who are already struggling with how to manage a large influx of people from countries outside the bloc afflicted by conflict, poverty, and climate-related issues. The prospect of large-scale movements of people from less wealthy new entrants into wealthier member states could put significant pressure on public services in some areas and shortages of workers and a brain drain in others. Migration also carries with it a heightened risk of community frictions which could be exploited by more extremist politicians if not managed properly.
- **Foreign policy:** New entrants risk making it even more difficult for the EU to act with a single voice on the global stage. The bloc's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CSFP), including its Common Security and Defence Policy, is one of a limited number of areas which remains subject to unanimity voting. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has pushed for the introduction of qualified majority voting in foreign affairs and taxation to prevent the bloc from being paralysed by vetoes from individual capitals as it looks to take on new members.
- **Defence:** Ukraine is fighting a war against Russia with little sign of a cessation of hostilities. While the EU has provided military hardware and financial support, it would be a step closer to the conflict if Ukraine became a fully-fledged member of the EU. Entry to the EU would also increase discussion about Ukraine joining NATO.
- **Multi-speed Europe:** The long-running debate that different parts of the EU should be able to integrate at different speeds is a double-edged sword. The idea, muted by French President Emmanuel Macron, could satisfy some countries by allowing them to enjoy some of the benefits of the Union before becoming fully fledged members. However, it could also encourage others to cherry pick or drag their feet on the required reforms to join the bloc, leaving Brussels with a more complicated task of managing relations with a range of half-in-half-out countries. However, the concept is already a reality, with several countries inside the euro-zone while others have retained their national currency and monetary policy, and some EU member states, including Ireland and Croatia, remaining outside the Schengen passport-free travel area.



Dods commentary – Eleanor Doorley – Political Consultant for EU foreign affairs, development, and defence

“Russia’s bloody invasion of Ukraine has injected fresh impetus into the EU’s enlargement process. The group of aspirants, including Moldova, Georgia, the six countries of the Western Balkans, and Ukraine itself, are keen to reap the economic, political, and security benefits of being in the world’s largest trade bloc. For Brussels, bringing new members into the fold promises to boost the size of the EU’s single market and strengthen its voice on the world stage. However, the merit-based accession process is a marathon not a sprint – candidate countries must make significant judicial and economic reforms ranging from guaranteeing the rule of law to establishing a functioning market economy, moves which are not always popular domestically. Enlargement also raises significant political and financial questions for the existing members states, including the prospect of becoming net contributors to the EU budget to pay for development in the less wealthy new members, and how entrants might shift the balance of power within the bloc. Enlargement is clearly going to be key issue for the next Commission to grapple with after the European elections in June 2024. But even before then, December’s European Council meeting will be a key moment in determining the pace and terms of this expansion.”



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