

# EU Enlargement to the Western Balkans: Where there is a will, there is a way

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[Photo Credit/Tomislav Georgiev]

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## 1. Introduction

Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine has exposed the weaknesses in the European security architecture propelling the geopolitical importance of the European Union's enlargement policy to the top of the EU agenda. Ukraine has emerged as a pivotal force in the enlargement process, serving as a catalyst for renewed discussions and strategic shifts within the EU.

The people of Ukraine had clearly chosen their European future in late 2013 when mass movements erupted against the then-President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to halt the signing of an association agreement with the European Union in favor of closer ties with Russia. The Revolution of Dignity was a pivotal moment in Ukraine's modern history and its path toward European integration. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Ukraine's bid for EU membership took place in unprecedented circumstances of a full-scale war and human and economic losses, but it clearly highlighted the country's aspirations for deeper integration with Europe.

Ukraine's unprecedented resolve for EU membership served as a wake-up call for the EU, prompting it to revitalize its enlargement policies, acknowledging the power of enlargement as the primary catalyst for democratic and rule of law reforms, but also as a strategic necessity to address both political and security dimensions. Although the war complicates the accession process, the EU reacted swiftly by putting Ukraine and Moldova solidly in the accession path.

Enlargement has been the EU's most successful foreign policy tool, creating stability, prosperity, and unity in the continent, but also expanding the Union's reach, influence, and economic power. In the 1990s and 2000s, enlargement created a virtuous cycle of democratic reforms, progress, and economic development in Central and Eastern Europe. Earlier, in the 1980s, European integration was instrumental in the consolidation of Southern European democracies, in Greece, Spain and Portugal.

Unfortunately, the beneficial effects of enlargement policy did not readily extend to the Western Balkans because of the slow and prolonged accession process,

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\* The content of this article is the sole responsibility of the author and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the European Parliament.

EU's ambivalence over the realistic prospect of membership, enlargement fatigue in European societies, and the weak and not serious commitment to reform in the region. Credibility of the EU membership and coherence of the enlargement process have proven to be fundamental to motivate candidate countries to undertake painful domestic reforms. While for the Western Balkan countries' enlargement fatigue has created a reform fatigue and skepticism, for Ukraine the credibility has been boosted by the EU's rapid reaction and political stewardship.

Not only has Ukraine's EU accession process injected new urgency into the enlargement debate but it has also underscored enlargement as a strategic necessity for ensuring a stable, prosperous, and peaceful Europe. The expedited process of Ukraine's candidacy, in contrast to that of the Western Balkan countries, has set a precedent and revitalized the enlargement agenda; this has the potential to motivate countries of the Western Balkans to accelerate their reform efforts.

In the following pages, we review some of the key developments and critical dilemmas in the enlargement policy providing pointers for understanding their complexity, as well as ideas for unleashing the enlargement potential. The analysis is not exhaustive, but instead seeks to add nuance and assist in refining policy solutions. At the end of the report, we propose a number of policy recommendations aiming to facilitate the acceleration of the enlargement process and to making it more effective to the benefit of both the EU and candidate countries.

## 2. State of play in EU enlargement and implications for the Western Balkans

The Russian war against Ukraine and Kyiv's unwavering European commitment have played a defining role on the pace and focus of the EU enlargement process. This 'new momentum' for enlargement is a concrete demonstration of the widespread recognition that the process needs to be revitalized, for the sake of Europe's security and its weight in the world. EU member states took historic political decisions to open accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova, something surely unthinkable before 24 February 2022. Meanwhile, the EU has reached a decision to open talks with Bosnia and Herzegovina and officially started the accession negotiations talks with Albania and North Macedonia in July 2022. The screening (explanatory and bilateral) process was completed in December 2023, involving 167 meetings and more than 1000 experts from the EU Commission and 2000 from the two countries.[1]

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[1] Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, "Screening meetings completed as part of screening process with Albania and North Macedonia", 8 December 2023. Available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/screening-meetings-completed-part-screening-process-albania-and-north-macedonia-2023-12-08\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/screening-meetings-completed-part-screening-process-albania-and-north-macedonia-2023-12-08_en)

This important work represents the first step in the accession negotiations process. The June 2024 endorsement at the Intergovernmental Conference (ICG) for Montenegro of the rule of law benchmarks (Chapters 23 and 24 in the 'fundamentals cluster') is also significant for the country's EU accession path.

The decisions for Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the progress in Georgia's accession perspective and Montenegro's negotiations, as well as Albania's and North Macedonia's start of accession negotiations re-focus the enlargement policy as one of European geopolitical consolidation, where the EU hopes to secure its borders as it grapples with the challenges of a more competitive, insecure and unpredictable global landscape.

Two questions emerge, however: firstly, what is the enlargement's new momentum deadline? Given that the new EU legislative term is about to start, and as the complex geopolitics require more monetary and political resources, has the enlargement momentum reached its limits? The European Council decisions, while incredibly important, are also relatively symbolic, as they concern the start of a lengthy and often unpredictable process burdened with vetoes over bilateral disputes, with full membership not only far in the future, but also preconditioned by internal institutional reforms of the Union itself. There is nothing of the enlargement's new momentum in Greece's recent behavior towards neighboring Albania and the fact that Athens has managed to put a break on Tirana's opening of the first cluster of negotiation chapters.

A second question, linked to that, is whether EU enlargement will as a result re-centre on the transformative process. After all, the 2023 EU Enlargement Strategy noted that "EU membership is a geostrategic investment in a strong, stable and united Europe based on common values". [2] This implies that 'geopolitical enlargement' has not erased the need for Western Balkan countries to engage in reforms, not least demanding rule of law and institutional reforms securing democracy in the countries of the region. For a large group of member states, with France at the helm, safeguarding the established rules that ensure seamless functioning of the EU will be a clear demand. The EU is primarily a body of laws, which is pivotal to its existence.

The uncertainty of and limits to 'geopolitical enlargement' should be a wake-up call for the Western Balkan governments to swiftly recover from their own enlargement fatigue and start working diligently. They too can theoretically affect the rhythm at which enlargement could progress. But the politics of enlargement - still lingering in the Council,

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[2] European Commission, "2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy", Brussels, 8 November 2023. Available at: [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2023-communication-eu-enlargement-policy\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/2023-communication-eu-enlargement-policy_en)

as noted above - risk seriously hindering Western Balkan governments from reinvesting political capital in costly enlargement reforms. Rebuilding trust and bringing back honesty to the table of negotiation will be key. Resolute commitment to the Western Balkans' enlargement perspective at the same level as that offered to Ukraine will also be crucial.

### **3. The war in Ukraine changing EU's strategic thinking about enlargement**

Geopolitics has routinely driven enlargement – the 'big bang' wave of 2004 was very much about securing the European east; the Mediterranean enlargement in the 1980s had a lot to do with consolidating democracies in Southern Europe. Russia's war on Ukraine has determined security to become the front and centre element to the process. It has provided further impetus for boosting EU defence. Security and stability have moved up as the perceived core benefits of EU expansion and the process itself has acquired new strategic significance.

Enlargement as a strategic response to Russia's challenge – not only in Ukraine, but also across the continent – has determined a wide-ranging adjustment of EU policies and processes to align with this overarching principle. This time enlargement is not happening in a vacuum, but with Russia actively seeking to undermine it and with the looming threat of a new Trump term in the United States. Additionally, actors internal to the EU may persist in their attempts to disrupt the process or seek to adjust it to fit their own ideological, political or geopolitical preferences.

In reality, while we can certainly say that the EU has already displayed impressive resolve and deployed ambitious, unprecedented measures to support Ukraine and strengthen its own security, this has been very much in crisis management mode – and Brussels has already demonstrated to be quite effective in handling crisis. It is only from now on that we may actually see if such prompt crisis response can and will evolve into actual strategic planning for a long-term response to the challenge posed by Russia.

One of the key measures of success in that sense is to prevent spoilers, like Russia, from influencing member states' decisions on enlargement in the Council and from activating disruptors in candidate countries. Simply put, the EU cannot afford a belt of instability, where competition with third countries and autocrats leave the EU as only an influential economic actor, but otherwise a weak political player. There will be no lasting stability with countries of Europe's East and Southeast left outside the EU. The EU needs to reach a political decision to enlarge, thereby sending a strong signal inside and outside its borders that it is serious about not leaving any grey zones in its southeast and east neighborhood.

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At the same time, there is a danger that the geopolitical argument may be reduced to the ultimate imperative being only to secure Europe, potentially missing out on the transformative impact demonstrated in past enlargements. In that sense, it may be tempting to many member states that such an endeavour stop short of actual membership for candidate countries.

If geopolitics and security end up dominating relations with the EU vicinity to such an extent that it trumps reforms and transformation, this may also prompt Brussels and the capitals to prefer a continuation of the modus operandi, which has been to engage with governments and institutions, rather than societies, and thus unwillingly prop up autocrats in the region, who are able to deliver quickly on such matters. All in all, the revived interest in enlargement must not only stem from the EU's new geopolitical and security perspectives, but it needs also to reaffirm the trust in the transformative and democratising power of European integration.

## 4. Revitalised drive for institutional reform

The war in Ukraine has put EU's institutional reform back at the top of the agenda in two ways. On the one hand, the war highlighted some of the core limitations of EU decision-making in times of crisis. The grave challenges that EU member states have encountered with Hungary, when adopting urgent and complicated responses to the Russian invasion, has made decision-makers acutely aware of the need to revisit the unanimity principle.

On the other hand, the new momentum for enlargement and the acceleration of the accession process for the Eastern trio has also put into question the EU's preparedness for accepting new members. Talk of new accessions has rekindled old concerns about the EU's "absorption capacity" and linked enlargement to the need for EU internal reforms to ensure the EU institutions' smooth functioning. Indeed, enlargement is now conditioned upon the EU's own institutional reforms. Following Chancellor Scholz's endorsement [3] of President Macron's bring-our-own-house-in-order-first remarks, [4] the link has become official wording starting with the Granada Declaration of October 2023 [5]

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[3] Süddeutsche Zeitung, "Scholz will EU-Erweiterung mit Reformen erleichtern", 18 June 2022. Available at: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/bundesregierung-scholz-will-eu-erweiterung-mit-reformen-erleichtern-dpa.urn-newsml-dpa-com-20090101-220618-99-713116>

[4] Politico, "Macron urges reform of 'bizarre' system for EU hopefuls", 16 October 2019. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/macron-urges-reform-of-bizarre-system-for-eu-hopefuls/>

[5] European Council, "The Granada declaration". Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/06/granada-declaration/#:~:text=We%2C%20the%20Leaders%20of%20the,for%20the%20benefit%20of%20all>

and further reiterated at the December 2023 European Council. [6] The message is clear: both future member states and the EU need to be ready at the time of accession, and both tracks should advance in parallel.

But the extent of such institutional reforms and their exact timing, as well as their sequencing in relation to forthcoming accessions is anything but easy to agree on among twenty-seven member states. Legally speaking, the Treaty of Lisbon provides the necessary provisions in terms of institutions and decision-making processes for the EU to be able to welcome new members without any Treaty changes. Hence, some member states have largely attributed the drive to link EU internal reforms to new accessions to the hesitance to move forward with enlargement; or, alternatively, enlargement could offer the opportunity for a radical reshaping of the EU. For example, some member states consider the insistence of France and a few others to tie new accessions to extensive institutional reforms as thinly-veiled efforts to change the balance of power in the EU; streamline decision-making by reducing the scope of blockages by smaller member states; or bring to the fore the idea of moving towards a multi-speed EU (differentiated integration). Such radical restructuring is not seen favourably in many EU capitals. [7]

From the point of the view of the Western Balkans, a sure-to-be long and agonizing process of building consensus on EU's institutional reforms simply cascades on the frustration built over the region's accession prospects for at least a decade. Many rightly wonder what will happen with enlargement if it is made strictly conditional on the EU's institutional reforms and then the member states fail to agree on these changes. This uncertainty fuels the already worrying levels of euro-skepticism in the Western Balkans. Recent polls by the International Republican Institute in the Western Balkans register a growing level of popular frustration with the slow and highly uncertain process of accession to the EU, most acutely observed in North Macedonia. [8]

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[6] European Council conclusions, 14-15 December 2023. Available: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/15/european-council-conclusions-14-and-15-december-2023/>

[7] Piotr Buras, Engjellushe Morina, "Catch-27: The contradictory thinking about enlargement in the EU", Report, European Council on Foreign Relations, November 2023. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/catch-27-the-contradictory-thinking-about-enlargement-in-the-eu/>

[8] International Republican Institute, "Western Balkans Regional Poll, February–March 2024". Available at: <https://www.iri.org/resources/western-balkans-regional-poll-february-march-2024-full/>



## 5. Bilateral blockages and the QMV solution

An area in which reform is more intensely sought pertains to blockages due to bilateral disputes between existing and prospective member states. Such stalemates are often unrelated to the actual fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria per se. A case in point is North Macedonia, whose EU accession progress has been blocked in the Council, successively by Greece and Bulgaria. To overcome such bilateral blockades and by extension facilitate and expedite EU decision-making on enlargement, the EU institutions and some member states are debating the possibility of introducing qualified majority voting (QMV) in the Council of the EU.

A January 2024 Slovenian-German non-paper to the General Affairs Council proposed ideas for “empowering the Council to decide by qualified majority with regard to certain (technical) interim steps of the enlargement process”. The non-paper proposed the opening of negotiating clusters, including the Opening Benchmark Assessment Reports (OBAR), proposing that they be decided by QMV in the Council, while the closing of negotiating chapters would still need approval by unanimity. This proposal seems to be a middle-way position between overhauling the process (as proposed for example in the French-German expert report) [9] and the position of keeping the process completely unchanged. Reportedly, a significant number of member states support this more modest set of ideas. [10] In contrast, the vast majority of the countries in the East and the Southeast oppose the idea of extending the use of QMV. [11] However, if there is a political decision to move forward it can be implemented immediately without any need for Treaty change.

Extending the use of QMV is not necessarily a silver bullet for accelerating enlargement, but would influence the EU member states to behave more responsibly and think twice before blocking a candidate country over a bilateral issue not directly related to the Copenhagen criteria. Decision-making would continue to be difficult if measures and/or practices that nurture a culture of consensus-seeking in the Council were not developed. [12]

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[9] Franco-German working group on EU Institutional Reform, “Sailing on High Seas – Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century”, Report, October 2023. Available at: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2617322/4d0e0010ffcd8c0079e21329bbbb3332/230919-rfaa-deu-fra-bericht-data.pdf>

[10] Wouter Zweers, Isabelle Ioannides, Zoran Nechev and Nikola Dimitrov, “Unblocking decision-making in EU enlargement: Qualified Majority Voting as a way forward?”, Clingendael, DGAP, ELIAMEP and Solutions, June 2024. Available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/unblocking-decision-making-eu-enlargement>

[11] Buras, Morina, op.cit.

[12] Zweers et al., op.cit.

Further, possible bypassing of bilateral problems through QMV should prompt the EU and its member states to rethink its own role and instruments in facilitating the settlement of disputes between existing and future member states. [13] Such bilateral disputes that are unrelated to the Copenhagen criteria and can be characterised as isolated disputes between specific member states and candidate countries, should be left outside the context of the enlargement process altogether. [14]

Finally, the new methodology introduced recently decreased the number of veto points by introducing clusters instead of opening individual chapters, however, the trend needs to continue by providing the Commission more freedom in reaching technical decisions in the intermediate stages of the negotiation process.

## 6. Devising interim solutions?

If a key factor driving existing member states' insistence on institutional reforms is the concern over unwarranted use of veto powers by newer members, then temporary measures could be put in place to allay such fears. Various such interim solutions could be devised, as long as they meet two conditions: a. that the solutions are temporary, with their expiry date strictly defined in temporal and political terms; and, b. that they are accepted and "owned" also by the future member states themselves.

One way forward, for example, could be to temporarily withhold the veto powers of new members over certain key areas. This status of "members minus veto" should be temporary – for an agreed and limited number of years – in order to ensure that after the provisional period, equality between member states will be ensured. [15]

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[13] Ioannis Armakolas, "The Promise of European Integration: Breathing New Life into the Settlement of Bilateral Disputes", Institute for Human Sciences-IWM, Vienna, 30 October 2023. Available at: <https://www.iwm.at/europes-futures/publication/the-promise-of-european-integration-breathing-new-life-into-the>

[14] Srdjan Cvijić, Nikola Dimitrov, Leposava Ognjanoska Stavrovska and Ivana Ranković, "Bilateral Disputes and EU Enlargement: A Consensual Divorce", Belgrade Centre for Security Policy and the Balkan Center for Constructive Policies - Solution, May 2024. Available at: <https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/bilateral-eng-08.pdf>

[15] Michael Emerson, Milena Lazarević, Steven Blockmans and Strahinja Subotić, "A Template for Staged Accession to the EU", Centre for European Policy Studies, 1 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/a-template-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/>

This provisional period of socialisation would offer the new member states a gradual introduction to the intricacies of EU policy-making. It would simultaneously provide the enlarged EU with the opportunity to reform itself, reduce the unanimity rule to the bare minimum, and extend to all member states the opportunity of a gradual learning curve for eventually moving away from using, and especially misusing veto powers altogether. Conversely, if efforts for EU institutional reform within a specified period of time fail, the newest members would assume their full powers and prerogatives under the current institutional configuration and rules. This juncture might well be the trigger likely needed to actually achieve political consensus for updating the EU's institutional structure and decision-making process in line with its future enlarged geography and more ambitious global role. [16]

When it comes to the ownership side, these ideas and prospective solutions should be the outcome of a sincere and transparent process of consultation between the EU and the prospective member states. Although the final decision on these temporary arrangements rests with the EU, the future member states should be included in the process of designing the measures. Their elites and societies should be fully informed and potential risks of political or public opinion fallout and negative sentiment among future members should be offset by measures specifically designed for that purpose by the two sides. In fact, it could even be beneficial if the leaders of the Western Balkans themselves, possibly in coordination with the Eastern trio, were to initiate these consultations in a formal and systematic manner to brainstorm on and design such interim measures.

## 7. Gradual integration and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans

In parallel, the phasing-in approach for gradual integration into the EU, providing economic incentives to the Western Balkans countries to transform their societies and institutions, has also gained ground in EU institutions and member states. [17] The European Commission is seeking ways to introduce a more gradual accession process for the candidate countries in which they can benefit from the EU even before the actual membership. The widening economic and social gap between the Western Balkans and the EU countries over the last decade means that the real benefits for the citizens in the region would come from an access to the EU single market and funds related to the potentially high market including competitiveness shocks.

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[16] Nikola Dimitrov, Isabelle Ioannides, Zoran Nechev and Oana Popescu-Zamfir, "It's a Package Deal! Reforming and Enlarging the European Union in a Contested World", Institute for Human Sciences-IWM, Vienna, 2 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.iwm.at/blog/its-a-package-deal-reforming-and-enlarging-the-european-union-in-a-contested-world>

[17] Ibid.

Part and parcel of the new approach has become the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, which was adopted in May 2024. [18] The stated aim of the facility is to offer the Western Balkan countries progressive integration into the EU single market and socio-economic convergence with the EU, in return for the countries' concrete reforms on the 'fundamentals cluster' in support of their alignment with the EU's values, laws, standards, policies and practices. The Western Balkan countries would need to adopt a Reform Agenda with specific benchmarks and a timeline to explain how they will implement concrete reforms.

General preconditions for EU support also include that the governments in the region continue to respect effective democratic mechanisms, including a multi-party parliamentary system, free and fair elections, pluralistic media, an independent judiciary and the rule of law, and to guarantee respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. In addition to those conditions, Serbia and Kosovo, in particular, are expected to engage constructively on the normalisation of their relations, leading to tangible results. It rests to be seen whether the economic incentives that the facility offers (€2 billion in grants and €4 billion in loans) will be enough of a carrot for the Western Balkan governments to engage in meaningful reforms and reverse the enlargement fatigue.

## 8. The political landscape after the European elections: Ways forward for enlargement

On the backdrop of important enlargement policy changes and political decisions made during the 2019-2024 term, the new leaders in the EU institutions will need to work on further propelling and even completing the EU enlargement process with the accession countries both from the East and Southeast of Europe that have made the necessary reforms. Regardless of the shift to the right in many member states in the European elections, with populist radical right parties gaining votes and seats – and in some cases the government – across the EU, and liberal and green parties losing ground, the European Parliament will likely continue to support EU enlargement.

The election results showed that pro-enlargement mainstream political families in the European Parliament, together with those European Conservative and Reformist parties that support enlargement, remain a strong majority in favour of continuing the policy of EU widening.

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[18] Council of the EU, "Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans adopted", press release, 7 May 2024. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/05/07/reform-and-growth-facility-for-the-western-balkans-adopted/>

Pro-enlargement groups, therefore, maintain most of the agenda-setting power, including over the choice of the next European Commission president and the new Commissioner responsible for EU enlargement. As such, the expectation is that the pro-accession groups will keep the future of enlargement policy high on their agenda when negotiating over the profiles of the political leaders who will fill key positions in the Commission as well as when the Chair of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee will be appointed.

Moreover, having in mind its role in the EU budgetary powers, the new European Parliament could exhibit its pro-enlargement stance by reminding other EU institutions of their political commitment to the candidate states. With negotiations for the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework set to begin next year, the European Parliament can influence decisions so that funds are earmarked for the accession of at least some of the candidate countries during the next budgetary term.

## 9. Conclusion and Recommendations

Europe finds itself at a critical juncture, facing significant challenges from Russia amidst the ongoing war in Ukraine. This geopolitical context has underscored the importance of unity and strategic clarity within the EU. Moreover, the opening of the negotiation process of Ukraine and Moldova to the EU has brought renewed urgency to the enlargement discussions within Europe. Unlike the Western Balkan countries, Ukraine's candidacy has been expedited, setting a precedent and revitalizing the enlargement agenda. This development highlights enlargement not just as a technical process of alignment with the EU acquis, but as a strategic imperative for fostering "long-term stability, peace and prosperity across the continent". [19]

Based on the deliberations outlined in the policy paper, the following recommendations for the European institutions, member states, and the political leadership in the Western Balkans have been formulated. These recommendations are rooted in a commitment to enhancing the political unity vis-à-vis enlargement, modes of overcoming bilateral hurdles, as well as economic stability. As we navigate the complexities of today's interconnected world, these proposals aim to not only address immediate challenges but also to lay a foundation for a more resilient and inclusive future for all in Europe.

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[19]2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, COM/2023/690 final. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52023DC0690>

**To the EU institutions and member states**

- **The new Commission and the European Council should send a clear signal and reach a political decision to accept new member states from the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe within the timeframe of the new Multiannual Financial Framework.**
- **In the new Commission the position of the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations should be elevated to and renamed a Vice President for Enlargement Policy and New Accessions. The post should ideally be filled by an influential political leader from a country that actively supports enlargement, in line with the rules and values of the EU.**
- **The new empowered Vice President for Enlargement Policy and New Accessions should take up the task of designing new instruments and policy principles that will ensure that the EU plays an assertive and constructive role in the settlement of bilateral disputes that cripple enlargement and weaken the credibility of the EU in the Western Balkans.**
- **Make use of the European Commission instruments used for the monitoring of EU policies in its member states in the candidate countries. These include the European Union's rule of law mechanism and report, and the European Union Justice Scoreboard, ideas that have been endorsed by the European Parliament and discussed in the EU Council.**
- **Clear signals should be offered to the Western Balkans that the enlargement policy remains a merit-based process ensuring a level playing field for all, despite the expedited process for Ukraine and Moldova, which reflects the geopolitical urgency in Europe.**
- **The new European Commission, Parliament and Council should foresee budgetary allocations for new member states in the next Multiannual Financial Framework showing clear commitment for future enlargement.**
- **Full membership needs to be the target in sight. Nothing short of that will provide enough incentives for reform. Gradual integration should not become a way to stall, but to accelerate accessions, while in parallel reassuring member states of the safeguards needed for the functioning of the internal market, rule of law standards and the like. Gradual integration policy areas should be expanded and tangible inclusion and financial incentives should be given to candidate states to fulfill all the necessary criteria in the various policy areas.**
- **The use of Qualified Majority Voting should be extended in the intermediate stages of the negotiation process. Member states should consider favourably the ideas contained in the German-Slovene non-paper as a compromise solution between the two camps in the EU of those states that advocate for massive expansion of the QMV and those that prefer to see no changes in the process.**

- **Common Foreign and Security Policy alignment of candidate states should be elevated to key pillar of the EU conditionality on par with the focus on the fundamentals. Reflecting the new geopolitics imperative in Europe, alignment should be frontloaded in the accession negotiations. Candidate states should be rewarded or sanctioned accordingly, including in terms of their inclusion and exclusion respectively in EU debates and negotiations about key questions of security and defence in Europe.**

#### **To the Western Balkans countries**

- **The revived focus on EU enlargement triggered by Ukraine should be seized as a historic opportunity by the candidates and prospective candidates in the Western Balkans. They need to promptly recover from their own enlargement fatigue, manifest a clear commitment and work diligently on fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria and acquis requirements.**
- **The leaders of the region should fully engage in the renewed enlargement debate and endeavour to speak with one voice, endorsing policy proposals that would undoubtedly facilitate their accession process, such as the introduction of the QMV in the interim stages of the process.**
- **Effective coordination with Ukraine and Moldova could amplify this influence, rendering it even more significant. Western Balkan countries should present a united front in their European integration efforts, as the success of one will undoubtedly benefit all. This spirit of solidarity can also serve as a positive example for neighbouring EU member states.**