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ENLARGEMENT AND REFORM FOR THE EU: A Geopolitical Response?

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In the EU, there are differing positions on enlargement and reform. Some member states prioritise enlargement and others reform. This CIDOB Briefing presents the main conclusions of the seminar "Enlargement and Reform for the EU: A Geopolitical Response?", which was organised with the support of the programme Hablamos de Europa *from the Secretariat of State for the European Union. The aim of the session was to discuss the state of EU enlargement and reform and whether they can or should be understood as a response to the new geopolitical reality. The seminar was a follow-up to the side event, "The Future of the EU: Is Institutional Reform Necessary?" held under the auspices of the General Affairs Council in Murcia during Spain's EU Council presidency in the latter half of 2023.*

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Introduction

Some member states are willing to explore the confines of EU treaties to their very limits in order to avoid reforms that could mean opening up the treaties. Others believe that, without in-depth reform, the EU cannot respond to present-day challenges, and very much less if it ends up consisting of 30 or more members. The same is true of enlargement. Some member states are willing to speed up the process, even without closing all the chapters, or opened to the participation of some candidate countries in certain common policies. However, other member states see enlargement as guided by the traditional merit-based approach alone.

During Spain's Council of the EU presidency, the European Council approved the Granada Declaration in which enlargement was described as a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability, and prosperity. It also stated that if this process was to be fruitful, the European Union and the member states must be prepared for the moment when enlargement becomes a reality. In other words, they need to lay the foundations for internal EU reform. The Granada Declaration observed that these two processes—reform and enlargement—are thoroughly interdependent.

This CIDOB Briefing presents the current state of the enlargement and reform processes; reviews arguments favouring one process over the other; analyses expectations arising from enlargement and reform in comparison with the reality of the political situation; considers challenges presented by enlargement; spotlights the case of Balkan enlargement; and studies options for moving towards enlargement and reform.

State of the question

The new geopolitical situation—marked by the war on Ukraine, global fragmentation, and fraying of the transatlantic link—requires greater capacity for institutional action and adaptation. At this point, the EU has been criticised for not taking sufficiently fast or effective decisions. This problem could be exacerbated with the entry of more member states. All this suggests that, without institutional reform that includes decision-making, the EU's influence on the global scale might be further eroded.

Although enlargement and reform are sometimes treated as parallel processes, enlargement necessarily needs treaty reform because each new accession requires adjustments to the Union's primary law. Reform is

a direct consequence of the process of enlargement. Furthermore, enlargement without reform runs counter to the EU's founding principles of widening and deepening. It also breaches the Copenhagen Criteria for accession which set conditions not only for candidate countries but also for the EU itself because it must be prepared to receive new members.

In this situation, it would be advisable to rethink the logic that contrasts technical merits with political criteria. Both approaches have coexisted with a certain degree of tension in all the milestones of European integration. Although the technical principles have been clear, political goals have always allowed for certain room for manoeuvre and imagination. The 2004 enlargement is a clear example where the geopolitical reality was present in the decision-making about enlargement. In each round of enlargement, there have been cases of candidate states that did not fully comply with the criteria, but their accession was politically necessary if the entry of the associated set of candidates at the time was to make sense. The fact that candidate countries must be prepared when they enter the EU should not be overlooked, but neither should it be forgotten that politics—and not only technical standards—has always been part of the process.

Nevertheless, despite the urgency imposed by the current geopolitical context—war in Ukraine, great power rivalry, and institutional fatigue—European capitals have so far given no sign of any clear political impetus with regard to undertaking thoroughgoing reforms or speeding up the enlargement process. A further factor is that some member states prioritise enlargement while others believe that, without reforms, enlargement cannot happen.

The leaders of enlargement

The countries that give priority to enlargement see it as a geopolitical necessity while, in their view, institutional reform is neither a condition nor an imperative need. It is merely a possibility. For those countries advocating enlargement, the aim is to protect the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans from Russian influence. From this standpoint, the EU's open-door policy strengthens regional stability, prosperity, access to strategic raw materials, European competitiveness, and the security of the continent.

For this group of EU member states, institutional reform would not be a priority because they see no clear benefits in some of the proposals, such as reducing the number of Commissioners, limiting the number of parliamentarians, and revising the role of the rotating presidencies of the Council of the EU. They believe that, given the lack of political consensus, reform could result in crisis, as happened with the Constitutional Treaty in 2005. Accordingly, they suggest that any investment of political capital in uncertain reform could distract from the EU's critical objectives of strengthening its security and economy.

In any case, the idea of geopolitical enlargement has lost prominence now that the initial shock of the Russian aggression in 2022 has abated. More and more countries are of the view that the approach to enlargement should be based on merit and not solely on the geopolitical situation. Candidate countries must rigorously observe the accession criteria, and any privilege that is granted must respect the integrity of the single market. This does not prevent states that foreground enlargement from believing that considerable political capital must be allocated to helping candidate countries complete the reforms they must implement before attaining accession.

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The reformist bloc

For the countries that prioritise reform, enlargement is a subsection of a larger project, namely political deepening of the Union. Reforms must be a means for attaining strategic objectives and not an end in themselves, even though the Union goals do not seem very clear at present. Deepening European integration should allow the EU to function as a global player and to counter the declining international influence of its member states. Reform would also be necessary if successful enlargement is to happen since, as the Copenhagen Criteria state, the EU must prepare itself to receive new member states.

However, enlargement has come up against an "invisible wall". Some member states must consent to the accession of a new member either by means of a referendum or through their legislative branch. With the current levels of polarisation and fragmentation in the various political systems, and without support of public opinion for enlargement, achieving a majority could be a challenge. Moreover, referendums have proven to be a double-edged sword at various points of European integration. Hence, promising enlargement without taking into account the existence of this stumbling block could undermine the Union's influence.

From this perspective, enlargement is conditional upon in-depth reform of the European project. Without constitutional changes and a clear narrative of the future of the EU, any accession plan risks crashing against a legal and political wall. The key to tackling this situation would be combining strategic ambition with institutional realism.

Expectations versus reality

The European Union is at a turning point. Enlargement has gained credibility in recent years, especially with the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, with progress in Albania and Montenegro, and with the recovery of political impetus since the invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, hopes for fast-tracked accession, like that expressed by Ukraine in 2022, have faded. Despite the geopolitical pressures, neither Ukraine nor Moldova has initiated formal accession negotiations, so the prospects for joining the EU by 2030, as proposed by the European Council or the Franco-German Expert Group, seem increasingly remote.

In contrast to the enlargement process, there is no such level of political commitment to reform. After the momentum of 2022 and 2023, the pace of discussions on institutional reform has slowed considerably. Although the European Council adopted an action plan in June 2024, the political assessments assigned by the Commission have not yet been presented. Neither is there any institutional pressure to hasten the process, which raises questions about the expressed willingness to move forward with structural reforms.

Experience also shows that there are no shortcuts. Both reform and enlargement require time, sustained political commitment, and an institutional architecture capable of incorporating new members without jeopardising the EU's capacity to act. Enlargement does not generate enthusiasm either: although countries like Montenegro and Albania can move ahead with their negotiations, this does not represent structural change but, rather, continuation of the (geo)political and institutional status quo since they are small countries.

EU leaders and member states have set goals and promised to complete the enlargement process. However, the political reality presents major obstacles. Enlargement could be blocked by a wall of public opinion and the varying constitutions of member states. As for reform, it lacks sufficient political capital to see it through.

Challenges: rule of law, public opinion, and budget

Enlargement and reform face a range of challenges arising from the internal dynamics of the Union. First, there is the fear of being unable to protect rule of law if enlargement occurs, not only because of the quality of the rule of law in the candidate countries, but also because it is deteriorating in existing EU member states. Before the EU embarks on any geopolitical enlargement, it must be possible to guarantee rule of law in all member states, and the EU must equip itself with political tools to ensure that protection of rule of law is not sequestered for use as a bargaining chip by blocking decisions in the Council.

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Second, enlargement and reform must not occur in isolation from public opinion. One of the lessons learned from the 2004 enlargement is that citizens do not want to feel excluded from the process. According to the September 2025 Eurobarometer, only 32% of Europeans feel informed about enlargement and 67% feel completely uninformed. This absence of citizen involvement is almost more worrying than the absence of explicit support since it disallows democratic legitimacy in the project of enlargement.

Although the geopolitical narrative resonates with the public, citizens, do not perceive aspects like rule of law and institutional reforms as priority matters. Only 25% consider that candidate countries must comply with these standards, which reveals a disconnect between political discourse and public opinion. Accordingly, EU enlargement cannot move forward without a clear strategy of communication and citizen participation.

Finally, the economic and financial cost of enlargement must be considered because the cost to taxpayers is the third greatest concern among European citizens in this regard. The present proposal of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) does not foresee any significant increase in the budget, even though it may include new member states like Ukraine. The budget is not only a technical matter, but also an expression of the EU's political vision. Although it is frequently repeated

that there is an urgent need to act more vigorously in areas like defence and security, as it stands, the intention is to do more on these initiatives with the same budget. This contradiction is a demonstration of lack of political will and also the many obstacles to providing the EU with the means required to achieve the objectives that the Union and its members have set for themselves. If a more active EU is desired, more shared resources are needed. Unless the financing of enlargement is addressed, the EU and its member states will have to contend with structural inconsistency.

Whither enlargement? The case of the Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood

The history of EU enlargement with the Western Balkans has, for years, been a chronicle of broken promises, institutional fatigue, and citizen frustration. However, in the present circumstances marked by the war on Ukraine and growing geopolitical competition, the narrative has begun to change. Enlargement is no longer presented as a technical process alone but also as a strategic tool connected with security and defence.

Indeed, there is a strong commitment to enlargement with the Western Balkans, at least rhetorically, for reasons of regional security and geographical proximity. Nevertheless, the Balkan countries have lost faith in the European project since they see the promise of accession as both distant and uncertain. Additionally, there are persistent concerns that the Western Balkans will be sidelined in favour of Ukraine and Moldova, which would result in the loss of a strategic region. This would also open the door to third parties: Russia, which already has a significant media and symbolic presence, especially in Serbia where it is perceived as the country's main benefactor (although the EU contributes more resources); China, which has gone from being a silent investor to deploying a strategy of cultural and political penetration; and Qatar, which is investing in new infrastructure like the new Belgrade waterfront. All these actors are offering unregulated investment, which contrasts with European requirements in the domains of governance and rule of law.

Since the outbreak of the war on Ukraine, the Balkan countries have gone from being recipients of peacekeeping missions to becoming active contributors in the area of defence. Albania and North Macedonia have signed security agreements with the United States and are preparing to participate in PESCO projects with the European Defence Agency. At the bilateral level, EU member states have intensified military cooperation with countries of the region: France with Albania, Italy and the Netherlands with Serbia, and France and Slovenia with Montenegro, by means of multilateral agreements on cybersecurity and digital diplomacy.

In an attempt to overcome the apathy deriving from the enlargement process, a new narrative calling for accession of the Balkans as a strategic investment rather than as an economic and political burden is being widely disseminated. The argument goes that the Balkan countries could make a significant contribution to European security. With the exception of Serbia, they have already aligned themselves with the EU with regard to sanctions against Russia, and they possess the potential to develop a regional defence industry. This narrative aims to rekindle lost enthusiasm and to demonstrate that not proceeding with enlargement will have a real geopolitical price.

Deepening European integration should allow the EU to function as a global player and to counter the declining international influence of its member states. Reform would also be necessary if successful enlargement is to happen since, as the Copenhagen Criteria state, the EU must prepare itself to receive new member states.

Nevertheless, this engagement with the Balkan countries entails risks. It can lead to regional fragmentation because most agreements are bilateral or minilateral without a unified vision, which weakens cohesion and possibilities of a shared strategy. It can also lead to an escalation of tensions because some agreements have been perceived as provocative. For example, Serbia condemned the defence agreement between Albania, Croatia, and Kosovo, while that between Serbia and Hungary is causing concern in other countries. This could lead to a loss of normative legitimacy for the EU, which risks being seen as a power that is militarising its southeastern border instead of being a regulatory actor that promotes democracy and rule of law. This defensive perception of the EU is reminiscent of the historical role of the Balkan countries as the "militarised frontier" between empires, and nowadays between Russia and the eastern Slavs. This could undermine the credibility of the European project in the region.

How can the EU move towards the processes of enlargement and reform?

If the EU is to overcome this current paralysis, it will need to commit to key political actions and intervene in several processes in an interrelated way.

There is consensus on the need to introduce qualified majority voting at different points in the decision-making process. The persistence of vetoes—for example, that of Hungary—exposes the limits of unanimity. Extending the use of qualified majority voting is proposed as a viable technical although politically complex solution. For example, applying qualified majority voting in the intermediate phases of the enlargement process could remove obstacles to progress while keeping unanimity for the final decision.

Similarly, gradual enlargement offering partial benefits to candidate countries that are making progress with their reforms could facilitate the process in the long term, provided that respect for rule of law is guaranteed and mechanisms for reversal in the event of noncompliance are established.

Another way forward would be the creation of a smaller core group of states which, by means of coalitions of the willing, could make decisions in certain circumstances. This flexible integration would allow progress in reforms without the need for unanimity or amending treaties and thus preserving institutional unity. In this framework it would be possible to explore decision-making formulas like supermajorities.

This flexibility is emerging as an essential tool. Faced with frustration caused by the requirement of unanimity, a model of flexible integration with robust governance is proposed. This flexibility would not be that of a multi-speed Europe but, rather, a constructive instrument to preserve unity of action and the functioning of the internal market, especially in key areas such as economic governance, migration, and defence. This flexible architecture could be organised in concentric circles, where rule of law would be the criterion for access at every level of integration.

As described in the Franco-German Report, there could be at least four circles. The smallest would consist of EU countries forming coalitions of the willing to deepen political union on matters from the euro to any other issues that might arise. The next circle would be EU member states that are linked by the political objectives of Article 2 of the TEU. The third would be focused on the single market and structured by a kind of partnership that is not linked to the principle of an ever closer Union. The fourth and final circle would be concerned with sharing geopolitical objectives and structuring cooperation through association agreements. The boundary of respect for rule of law would lie between the third and fourth circles. This would allow for the establishment of clear standards for participating in the single market and other well-defined policies, without encouraging exclusion. The circles would be protected by reversibility mechanisms guaranteeing compliance by member states, while also affording legal and political security.

In addition, there are three important mechanisms that can facilitate enlargement and reform: education and European mobility, definition of the limits of the European project, and strengthening public diplomacy. On one hand, promoting education and European mobility fosters direct contact among citizens, especially young people, and this generates empathy and mutual understanding, which can pave the way for more comprehensive integration in the long term. On the other hand, defining the geographic and functional limits of the European project would help to delimit the scope of enlargement and reform. At present, there is no debate about how far the EU might extend, about the criteria that might exclude certain countries, or about the circumstances that could modify the status of neighbouring countries to potential candidates. Neither is there any discussion about the type of political union that the European Union wishes to construct, nor about the degree of integration it aims to achieve.

Finally, in the current political situation—marked by the war on Ukraine and growing rivalry among the powers—the EU must communicate enlargement and institutional reform not only as technical processes but also as strategic responses that would bolster its legitimacy and appeal. For decades now, enlargement has been presented as a technical process based on compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria, which projects a bureaucratic image of the EU, detached from citizens'

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emotions and aspirations. Meanwhile, other actors have exploited nation-state-based identity as an expression of popular will. If this trend is to be countered, it will be necessary to reformulate the enlargement narrative and offer it as a tool for protection, empowerment, and belonging. The EU must present itself as the only viable geopolitical option for guaranteeing security, prosperity, and freedoms in the candidate states. To this end, it must strengthen its public diplomacy, adapt its messages to local realities, and construct a shared European identity that would connect with citizens' aspirations in both candidate countries and member states.

If a more active EU is desired, more shared resources are needed. Unless the financing of enlargement is addressed, the EU and its member states will have to contend with structural inconsistency.

Conclusions

Thoroughgoing reform through changes in the treaties does not seem feasible in the short term. It is therefore essential to explore possible reforms within the current framework, to encourage flexibility without losing consistency in Union governance, to strengthen rule of law as a pillar of integration, and to relaunch the political debate on how the EU might adapt to enlargement which is, *a priori*, inevitable.

If enlargement proceeds without reform, the global relevance of the EU could be even further diminished. Countering the influence of other actors in candidate countries must be compatible with the EU's capacity for effective action. At the same time, understanding that the process of enlargement causes, and has previously caused frustration in candidate countries should ensure that the EU does not repeat its errors in Ukraine and Moldova.

Nevertheless, enlargement can also be an opportunity for advancing a more ambitious reform agenda. At the end of the process, it will be necessary to amend treaties, which could open the door to a more profound institutional transformation, thus highlighting the fact that both processes happen in unison and are indivisible.