CURRENT ASPECTS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION'S ENLARGEMENT POLICY

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Abstract:
The present study addresses the issue of EU enlargement, considered the EU's most effective foreign policy instrument and one of the Union's most successful policies, which has so far proven its transformative power, bringing peace, democracy and prosperity. Although they are at different stages of progress, according to the European Commission's enlargement reports, most candidate countries aspire to complete their accession negotiations to the Union during this EU electoral cycle, which ends in the summer of 2029. Currently, the EU's enlargement policy targets ten states: nine have official EU candidate status (Turkey, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Georgia), and one, Kosovo, is a potential candidate.
Keywords: *enlargement process, negotiation, instruments, responsibilities, priorities*

PRELIMINARIES

Since December 2024, the new European Commission has focused on actions to help Europe become stronger and more resilient. This has also been driven by the fact that the European Union must respond to challenges with boldness, determination and firmness [1]. Thus, a strong Europe takes responsibility for its citizens, proving that it can always live up to the responsibilities assumed by the Treaties, taking a firm stand against Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the war in Gaza.

On the 4th of November 2025, the European Commission published the annual package on the enlargement of the European Union. Therefore, the 2025 package reconfirms that the enlargement dynamic is a high priority today on the EU agenda. However, reform is a two-faced process, which depends on both domestic political will as well as on external support.

A recent Eurobarometer [2] survey shows that 56% of EU citizens support the enlargement, especially young and highly educated Europeans. At the same time, the desire of the citizens of the countries hoping to join the EU also reflects this aspiration,

confirmed, for example, by the referendum on the accession of Moldova to the EU and the parliamentary elections in Moldova, despite Russian interference.

PROSPECTS FOR EXPANSION

The European Union has approached its enlargement as a "geostrategic investment in the peace, security, stability and prosperity of Europe" [3]. In this regard, a series of instruments and policies have been mobilized towards the Western Balkans [4], Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.

Over the past two decades, the EU enlargement has been studied as the most powerful mechanism in the EU's foreign policy toolbox, as it has allowed the Union to have a considerable influence on its neighbourhood [5]. In this respect, the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAA) are part of the EU Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), whereas the Western Balkan countries are at the heart of the SAP.

Since Croatia's accession to the European Union in 2013, it has been observed that the European integration process of the countries in the region has been very slow, compared to other stages of enlargement, being marked by what the specialized literature has called "the enlargement fatigue" [6]. More specifically, the idea was deduced that the member states would not be sufficiently prepared to welcome new members, due to the changes that would occur in procedures and institutions.

After 2014, a year marked by the illegal annexation of Crimea and as a result of the increase in issues on the EU agenda, the European integration process no longer represented a political priority aimed at accelerating reforms and advancing in the integration stages. The doctrine has identified a number of causes for the delay in the process. One of the most recent concerns *the phenomenon of politicization of the EU enlargement process [7]*, which, initially, was conceived in technical terms, of normative transfer of the community acquis, managed at the supranational level by the European Commission and gradually brought directly in the hands of certain member states, which used veto in the Council to block the enlargement process.

From a political point of view, the subject of the European Union enlargement has been in the background for many years, but it has returned to the attention of European

leaders with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, after the submission of applications for membership by this state and the Republic of Moldova. Thus, the events generated by Russia's aggression in Ukraine in February 2022 had a direct geostrategic impact on the enlargement of the European Union, and the immediate consequence was the increase in the number of candidate states by two. The main objectives set by the EU towards the candidate states are to promote peace, stability, democracy and the rule of law and to ensure alignment with all EU norms, values and legislation through legislative approximation. In a statement, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, publicly announced that "The Western Balkans belong to the EU" [8]. This aspect reveals that the ultimate goal of EU involvement in the region remains full EU membership, and for this a comprehensive approach is adopted, using the entire set of policy instruments in its attempt to bring the region closer.

The opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, after more than two years of postponement and blockages in the Council, as well as the granting of candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina in December 2022, along with its placement alongside the other two candidate states that had no prospect of accession before the war (the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine), can be considered steps that confirm the importance given to enlargement.

It could be observed that the energy price crisis in the autumn of 2021, which anticipated the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, brought the energy security to the top of the European public policy agenda [9]. The European Union opted for the role of an energy security actor and an integrated approach to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, an intention determined by the geopolitical and economic impact of the war in Ukraine, as well as by the granting of the status of a candidate country for accession. The synchronization with the EU energy market represented at the same time a political declaration by the Ukrainian authorities of adherence to European values.

THE ISSUE OF EU ENLARGEMENT

The EU's enlargement strategy has changed over time (especially after Brexit), and is itself, like the Union, in a continuous transformation. Russia's ongoing all-out war

against Ukraine together with the new geopolitical realities have strongly revitalized the enlargement process.

In correlation with the EU's role at international level, Europeanization can be regarded as "a process of construction, dissemination and initialization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy styles and common beliefs and norms, which are first defined and consolidated in the Union's decision-making and then incorporated into the logic of internal discourse, identities, institutional structures and public policies" [10]. In an external context, including in the energy sector, the export of the European Union acquis is a main instrument of Europeanization [11].

The European Commission's proposals for improving the enlargement policy, launched since February 2020, are based on several key principles: more credibility on the part of political decision-makers in undertaking reforms; more political will for European integration, both on the part of decision-makers and at societal level; a more dynamic negotiation process; predictability [12]. Beyond the EU's obligations and expectations in relation to candidate states, the Union undertakes to respect meritocratic principles and objective criteria [13].

Each year, the Council usually adopts *Conclusions on enlargement*, assessing the progress made by each of the EU candidate countries and each of its partners on their European path.

The Annual Report on EU Enlargement, adopted by the European Commission on 4 November 2025 [14], provides a comprehensive analysis of the developments in the candidate countries over the past 12 months. The document reaffirms that the momentum for enlargement remains strong on the EU's priority agenda and confirms that the accession of new member states is becoming an increasingly concrete prospect.

The assessment of each country is accompanied by recommendations and guidance on reform priorities, thus providing a genuine roadmap for the partners in the enlargement process to achieve EU membership. The Commission has reaffirmed its commitment to supporting these future member states on their European journey, strengthening citizens' trust in the process and allowing enlargement to move forward smoothly.

In this context, the European Union has responded positively, using specific instruments to provide additional support for the political and economic reforms of the states that have expressed their intention to join the community bloc. In a European Commission factsheet of 24 November 2025, "Current stage - EU accession negotiations" [15], the candidate countries with open accession negotiations are specified: Albania, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, and the candidate countries and potential candidates with not yet opened accession negotiations are: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo.

Thus, as far as *Ukraine* is concerned, the Support Group for Ukraine (SGUA) was created in April 2014. The mandate of this operational structure was to provide assistance to Ukraine in the implementation of the Association Agreement and the Free Trade Agreement. This Agreement, signed in 2014 and entered into force two years later, provided additional incentives for Ukraine to implement and enforce the EU energy acquis. To date, the document is considered the most ambitious agreement the EU has ever offered to non-member states.

Ukraine is at the heart of the 2025 enlargement package [16], an aspect supported by its firm commitment even under the pressure of war. According to the Commission, "despite Russia's war of aggression, Ukraine remains strongly committed to the path of EU accession, having managed to complete the screening process and advance key reforms." The positive assessments emerging from the Commission's report on the measures taken by the leadership in Kiev concern: a plan on national minorities, roadmaps for the rule of law, administrative reform and the functioning of democratic institutions.

The Republic of Moldova submitted its application for EU membership in March 2022 and received the status of candidate country in June 2022. The closure of accession negotiations took place in June 2024, but it also cooperates with the EU within the Eastern Partnership.

The Republic of Moldova has been a member of the Energy Community since 2010, and its relations with the European Union in this strategic sector were formalized through the Association Agreement that entered into force on July 1st, 2016. As part of the European Union's commitment to provide support to the Republic of Moldova, the

High-Level Dialogue on Energy was launched in October 2021, a political-diplomatic cooperation format specially created to counter security challenges within this sphere.

The Republic of Moldova has made notable progress, as reflected in the 2025 Enlargement Package, as well as in the first EU-Moldova Summit in July 2025, a meeting that marked a new stage of cooperation and integration. It was noted that the Government in Chisinau adopted roadmaps for the reform of justice, public administration and the consolidation of democratic institutions. It also set itself the goal of completing the negotiations by early 2028, an ambitious goal that can be achieved by further accelerating reforms.

The European Union has opted for the role of an energy security actor and an integrated approach to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. This tactic has been favoured by the geopolitical and economic impact of the war in Ukraine, as well as by the granting the status of candidate country for accession.

Georgia could not immediately benefit from the same level of political and economic commitment from the Union. Another consideration underlying the EU decision is the disadvantageous geographical position of Georgia, which does not have common borders with the easternmost part of the Union. The geographical location in proximity to Russia may favour political closeness with it and, consequently, the regression of Europeanization and democratization, despite the population's support for accession to the Union.

After being denied candidate status in June 2022, Georgia succeeded in doing so in December 2023, but its accession process was subsequently suspended due to internal political developments. The country's European path of reforms was significantly slowed by the actions of the government in 2024. The parliamentary elections in October 2024 were held in a tense atmosphere, with controversial legislative amendments and voter intimidation, which undermined public trust in the electoral process. Comprehensive electoral and democratic reforms are required in Georgia to firmly resume its EU accession path.

Turkey has been an official candidate for EU membership since 2005, and its influence in the region should not be underestimated, as the country has historical and cultural ties with states and communities in the Western Balkans. Turkey's two-decade-

old bid to join the bloc has been frozen due to EU concerns over its human rights record, along with political disputes in the eastern Mediterranean and over Cyprus.

The European Parliament has debated the future of relations between the European Union and Turkey, with MEPs calling for an alternative to the accession of Turkey. A European Parliament Resolution [17] adopted by MEPs in Strasbourg plenary session shows that Turkey's accession process to the European Union should remain frozen due to its democratic backsliding. The European Parliament urges the Turkish government, EU institutions and EU member states "to continue to work towards a closer, more dynamic and strategic partnership, with a particular focus on climate action, energy security, cooperation in the fight against terrorism and regional stability".

Montenegro, which began accession negotiations in 2012, is considered the most advanced candidate among the six Western Balkan countries. Accession negotiations with Montenegro could be concluded by the end of 2026, if reforms continue, and those with Albania by the end of 2027 [18]. Montenegro has made significant progress towards EU membership, successfully closing four negotiation chapters in the past year, demonstrating its commitment to European integration. The country could conclude accession negotiations by the end of 2026 if it maintains the pace of reforms.

Albania has continued its accession process with four groups of negotiating chapters opened over the past year, making notable progress, in particular in the reform of the judiciary and in the fight against organised crime and corruption. Continued efforts are now needed to meet the interim benchmarks under the fundamental building blocks, following the completion of the necessary sectoral reforms. The Tirana government's objective is to conclude the negotiations by 2027, but achieving this depends on maintaining the pace of reforms and promoting inclusive political dialogue.

Serbia has been applying for membership in the European Union since 2009. Although the authorities in Belgrade had hoped to meet the necessary conditions after the country was granted candidate status in 2012, talks on accession have stalled. Over the past decade, all progress has been overturned by the nationalist rhetoric in Serbian politics. One of the most important reasons why Serbia is not part of the European Union is that the state has not resolved its problems with national minorities, which do not have a well-defined status. According to an OSCE document, there is no comprehensive anti-

discrimination legislation or a law on national minorities in the country. The constant tension in the region has maintained the distrust of European officials, who have noted the regression of Serbian democracy.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has recently achieved concrete results in its preparations for accession, as the state was marked by the political crisis in the Republika Srpska entity and the collapse of the governing coalition. Following the recent institutional changes in the Republika Srpska entity, Bosnia and Herzegovina has had the opportunity to implement reforms on the path to EU accession: full alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy, adoption of key reforms in the area of the integrity of the judiciary, combating money laundering and conflicts of interest. These positive developments have allowed the opening of accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2024. The Commission is preparing the necessary negotiating framework, and the authorities need to continue reforms in full compliance with European standards and appoint a Chief Negotiator.

North Macedonia, a country that applied for EU membership in March 2004 and received candidate country status in December 2005, completed the analytical evaluation (screening) of the acquis at the end of 2023. During its European journey, it continued the measures [19] related to the rule of law, by protecting the independence and integrity of the judiciary and by strengthening the fight against corruption, public administration reform and the functioning of democratic institutions, as well as the action plan for the protection of minorities.

Kosovo submitted its formal application for EU membership in December 2022 and remains committed to its European path, enjoying broad public support. However, the delay in the formation of institutions following the general elections in February 2025 has slowed down progress on reforms. The Commission has stated its readiness to prepare its opinion on accession as soon as the Council so requests. The authorities in Pristina have made progress in the fight against organised crime, the business environment has improved, but cross-party cooperation is needed. In addition, a normalisation of relations with Serbia is needed together with the implementation of the commitments made during the dialogue. Visa liberalisation for Kosovo citizens entered into force on 1 January 2024. However, the 2025 enlargement report [20] highlights the need to step up efforts to

strengthen the rule of law, reform public administration and protection of the freedom of expression in Kosovo. The Commission has taken the first steps to gradually lift the measures against Kosovo, in force since May 2025.

CONCLUSIONS

The Union must always have the necessary means to act autonomously in the face of current and future challenges posed by the prospect of enlargement. Global changes are influencing the world order, and the Union must take measures, in this respect, to strengthen defence, competitiveness and, above all, European democracy. European leaders are concerned about finding solutions to the pressing problems of Union citizens related to the prospects of enlargement, in order to maintain their confidence, while ensuring stability, security and a protected future on the European continent. All decisions within the EU enlargement process, including the opening or closing of negotiation chapters, are subject to unanimous adoption by the Council of the European Union, reflecting the collective agreement of its member states. Consequently, it can be said that the EU's role in the enlargement policy is shaped by the commitments undertaken towards each partner state. The MEPs underline that the democratic and pro-European aspirations of the candidate states, especially among young people, are a major reason for the intensifying their European journey [21]. Hence the intensification and maintenance of a constructive dialogue and the deepening of cooperation in areas of mutual strategic interest.

Although the enlargement framework states that each country is assessed individually, through a strict, fair and merit-based process, the prevailing regional geopolitical conditions indicate that the European integration prospects of Moldova and Ukraine remain closely linked. At this stage, Moldova's decoupling from Ukraine seems unlikely. Just as Moldova has Romania as a model for its EU accession, Ukraine has Poland as a supporter of its EU accession [22].

The developments recorded by the candidate and potential candidate states during the year 2025 confirm the inclusion of the European enlargement policy in a geostrategic security vision. Enlargement is no longer just a technical process, but a strategic approach that supports the stability of Europe, and the EU becomes an actor capable of

maintaining security in the region [23]. The achievement of this objective is based on the fact that a united Europe can maintain peace on the continent.

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