



# POSITIONS ON ENLARGEMENT OF THE 27

## WHAT DO EU POLITICAL PARTIES THINK?

### ABSTRACT

Enlargement perfectly illustrates the European Union's nature as a composite political space. Shaped by distinct historical trajectories, each EU member state responds to enlargement policy based on its own domestic experiences, perceived vulnerabilities and specific stakeholder dynamics. For this reason, Europarties – the political families in Brussels – remain diverse groups that share general orientations but can also diverge significantly when sensitive issues arise.

As national political parties remain dominant actors in EU politics, this study examines their positions on enlargement across the 27 member states. Although enlargement is officially central to the Union's geopolitical strategy, this research reveals that it remains a low priority for national political parties, largely absent from electoral campaigns and party programmes. Furthermore, the prevailing conditional consensus among mainstream parties around a merit-based approach often conceals significant divergences. This policy brief examines how party positions are influenced not only by ideology, but also by security concerns, historical and regional dynamics, institutional reforms debates and economic competition, particularly regarding agriculture and labour market.

Ultimately, the policy brief warns that in the current context, enlargement risks being reduced to a mere transactional geopolitical tool and a step toward an intergovernmental Union, rather than being treated as a long-term investment in European security, democracy and prosperity.



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	4
Diverging opinions within political groups .....	5
Migration and EU enlargement.....	8
Returns of Ukrainian refugees vs. attracting Balkan citizens .....	9
The Balkan route and the externalisation of migration .....	10
Geopolitical divides.....	10
Geographical proximity to Russia and the role of regionalism.....	11
China, Turkey and the US .....	13
Historical factors and bilateral issues .....	14
Economic dimension and EU enlargement.....	18
Sector competition: The impact of Ukrainian agriculture .....	18
Economic ties and regional stability as priorities for neighbouring Western Balkans countries.....	19
Conditions for accession to counter a race to the bottom .....	20
Institutional reforms and EU enlargement.....	21
The pro-Qualified Majority Voting bloc .....	21
The pro-unanimity bloc.....	22
The cautious bloc .....	23
Does the size of the country matter? .....	24
Concluding remarks .....	24
Recommendations for a progressive EU enlargement agenda .....	27
About the authors .....	34
On similar topics.....	37

## Introduction

Enlargement is a prime example of a policy area that highlights the European Union's composite political character. Each country has its own historical experiences, sense of vulnerability, and specific stakeholder configuration that together influence its response to enlargement policy. For this reason, political families in Brussels are diverse groups that share orientations but exhibit significant differences when sensitive issues arise.

National political parties remain dominant actors in EU politics and voters identify with them even when dealing with European politics. National political parties are indeed influenced by EU political groups and parties but it is they who select the nominees for the European Parliament electoral lists and, most of all, it is they who sit in the governments that run the Council of the European Union. This is how national electoral political cycles influence European decision-making.<sup>1</sup>

This complexity requires addressing in order for the enlargement process to advance. This research accordingly builds upon a February 2025 policy brief, "Political parties in the EU and the challenges of EU enlargement", published by FEPS in collaboration with Karl-Renner-Institut and CeSPI, by expanding analysis of parties' positions on EU enlargement to all EU member states.<sup>2</sup>

In particular, it examines the position of political parties across all member states towards new accessions from the Western Balkans and the so-called Trio of Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia). It is structured around the main cleavages that define the debate on enlargement at the domestic level. Party positions on enlargement are influenced by multiple variables: in addition to their ideological

orientations, the approach of each party is defined by geopolitical and security aspects, the existence of historical, bilateral, or regional ties, economic concerns, the state of the labour market, migration, and, finally, their consideration of the opportunity for EU institutional reform. This paper discusses these thematic issues, while a separate country analysis examines the position on EU enlargement of each political party in every member state.<sup>3</sup> Policy recommendations are included at the end.

The study employed qualitative research tools and desk review methods. It included an analysis of political party programmes and secondary sources, such as academic journals and policy papers. Based on a common interview guide, a total of 40 interviews were conducted with national experts, policy analysts, and a limited number of political party representatives, including members of the European Parliament across the 27 member states.<sup>4</sup>

As observed in the previous policy brief (2025),<sup>5</sup> enlargement policy is not a base for building electoral support for any European party. It is a highly specialised policy field, to the point that it is publicly addressed only sporadically, and is marginal in all parties' political programmes or manifestos. Indeed, it is not a salient topic in any member state's domestic political debate.

Overall, the findings of the 2025 brief indicated a prevailing conditional endorsement of enlargement among the mainstream EU political parties. They broadly share the view that enlargement should be merit-based and contingent on candidate countries' compliance with EU standards. However, the scope of the brief did not allow for a comprehensive understanding of the context and its possible evolution.

The current research, therefore, goes further by examining the reasons behind the nuances that shape the political arenas within member states, including cases in which political parties have not articulated a clear position on specific candidates or on enlargement as a whole. It warns of the risk that enlargement policy will be viewed only in light of its role in the geopolitical confrontation with Russia, or to its market component – or, even worse, as a step towards an intergovernmental multi-speed EU, organised around variable geometries.

### **Diverging opinions within political groups**

Ideological divisions do not play a straightforward role in the positions on enlargement taken by EU political parties. As noted in the first policy brief, the significant gains of right-wing and far-right parties in the June 2024 European elections, as well as in many national elections, seemed to call into question the future of enlargement.

However, while diverging opinions on enlargement exist within all European political families, the most marked divergences have emerged within the three right-wing European political groups: the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), the Patriots for Europe (PfE), and the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN). Each group has some members that are clearly in favour of new accessions, while others are radically opposed.

For some parties, there are practical reasons to oppose enlargement, starting from the risk that incorporating more countries could strain the EU's resources. Mostly, however, it is a matter of ideology – for instance, as in the case of France's far-right National Rally (Rassemblement National, RN – PfE) or Cyprus' National Popular Front (Ethniko Laiko Metopo, ELAM – ECR), an islamophobic rejection of European states with

significant Muslim populations, or which are considered migrant source countries. Relatedly, parties such as Malta's non-affiliated Imperium Europa, which represents a far-right, nationalist critique of enlargement, opposes further EU expansion on the grounds that it would threaten the continent's cultural cohesion and identity.

A few sovereignist parties oppose enlargement due their explicit pro-Russian leaning. Among them are France's National Rally (Rassemblement National, RN – PfE), Austria's Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ – PfE), Germany's Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD – ESN), and the Netherlands' Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV – PfE). Their appreciation of the authoritarian nature of Putin's regime pushes them to oppose even the EU sanctions enacted in response to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

In this camp, the strongest actor has been Hungary's Fidesz (PfE). In its governing position, it was not only to oppose the EU integration of Ukraine, but also to regularly veto military support to the country, creating a rift over one of the few issues on which member states had been largely united: the response to Russia's large-scale invasion.

More recently, Slovakia's Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-sociálna demokracia, SMER – Non-Inscrits, following expulsion from S&D) has been following Fidesz's path in promoting strong anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian narratives, blocking military aid to Kyiv, and maintaining relations with the Kremlin as well as opposing sanctions to Russia.

Since the October 2025 elections in the Czech Republic, the governing coalition led by former prime minister and oligarch Andrej Babiš has included the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy party (Svoboda a přímá demokracie,

SPD – ESN). Thus, we can expect that the positions of Slovakia’s leader Robert Fico, and Hungary’s Viktor Orbán, will be taken up by the Babiš’ government, albeit probably to a lesser degree.

Other sovereigntist parties belonging to the main right-wing groups are, conversely, in favour of enlargement. This is on the basis that the accession of new member states would reinforce the EU as a union of sovereign nations while simultaneously weakening the community method in favor of intergovernmental decision-making. This is the case with, for instance, the Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d’Italia, FdI – ECR), Poland’s Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS – ECR), and Spain’s right-wing Voice (Vox – PSE). What these parties fundamentally reject is the idea of deepening the EU’s political integration to accommodate the accession of new member states.

The ambiguities in the positions of Poland’s PiS and Italy’s FdI towards Orbán’s Fidesz and its pro-Russian stance created tensions in the ECR group. This was particularly so with the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD – ECR), which, with its strong anti-Russia position, staunchly opposed the incorporation of Fidesz into the group.<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes the ideological divide within the three right-wing groups takes the form of selective support to specific countries who they perceive as aligning with their vision of the Union. For instance, Fidesz ostracises Ukraine in the name of protecting the Hungarian minority there, but favours the accession of the Western Balkans, in particular Serbia.<sup>7</sup>

The same goes for Austria’s far-right FPÖ, which has backtracked on the country’s traditional support for regional cooperation in the Western Balkans in favour of open political

support only for the Serbian cause, which it believes will reinforce its sovereigntist ideas. Similarly, in contrast with Germany’s historical position, the AfD has taken a revisionist stance, openly siding with Serbia in its political conflict with Kosovo, and arguing against the latter’s independence. Meanwhile, building on France’s historical pro-Serbian stance, RN – despite its hostility towards enlargement – has established inter-party relations in the Western Balkans with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Bosnian-Serb secessionist entity Republika Srpska. Such widespread selective support among EU nationalists for Serbia has negative implications for regional cooperation.

Conversely, members of other political groups see Serbia’s pro-Russian orientation as a fundamental problem for Serbian accession. This is especially the case in the Baltic countries, where many political forces fear that Serbia could become a “Russian Trojan horse” if it joins the EU. This is true in the case of Estonia’s coalition government, comprising the Estonian Reform Party (Eesti Reformierakond, RE – RE-ALDE-EDP<sup>8</sup>), Estonia 200 (Eesti 200, E200 – EPP<sup>9</sup>) and the Social Democratic Party (Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond, SDE – S&D<sup>10</sup>), which met with Serbian representatives in January 2026. While confirming its openness to Belgrade’s accession, the coalition stressed that Serbia’s relations with Russia remain a “crucial” factor.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, during a meeting in 2024, former Latvian Foreign Minister Baiba Braže, from the ruling Unity (Vienotība, V – EPP) party, emphasised the need to “[join] sanctions against Russia”<sup>12</sup> to advance the accession process. The same position is held by political parties in Lithuania.

For the past decade, the EPP group’s approach to enlargement has been led by Germany’s Christian Democrat Union/Christian Social Union (Christlich Demokratische Union

Deutschlands/Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern, CDU/CSU – EPP) which emphasises the importance of the Copenhagen criteria<sup>13</sup> as a precondition to acceptance as a new EU member. At the same time, since 2014, to counter so-called “enlargement fatigue,” Germany has promoted the Berlin Process to revitalise the accession process of the Western Balkans, placing strong emphasis on the economic aspects of the region’s integration. The Austrian People’s Party (Österreichische Volkspartei, ÖVP – EPP) has largely endorsed the German approach and supported Austrian business interests in the region (Austrian banks, insurance companies, and firms have a significant presence there).

Currently the CDU/CSU and the EPP group emphasises in particular gradual integration in the Single Market as a preliminary step towards EU integration. Within the group, parties such as Go Italy (Forza Italia, FI – EPP) endorse this line suggesting that gradual integration is a concrete way to keep the enlargement promise while showing a strong interest in promoting the investment of Italian firms in the candidate countries.<sup>14</sup>

Among the least enthusiastic in the EPP is France’s The Republicans (Les Républicains, LR – EPP). Its position reflects the national concerns towards enlargement that balances the party’s traditional pro-European stance with a cautious approach towards new accessions. Similarly, the Polish People’s Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL – EPP), which represents farmers’ interests, supports EU enlargement but is concerned about competition from Ukraine’s agriculture sector, reflecting the anxieties of its voter base.

However, it is a member of the EPP, Bulgaria’s Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria–Union of Democratic Forces (Grazhdani za

evropeysko razvitie na Bulgaria–Sayuz na demokratichnite sili, GERB-SDS – EPP), which has been blocking North Macedonia’s candidacy for years. The EPP clearly has not been exercising enough leverage on its Bulgarian member, to put aside its nationalist position, showing instead to be content with the current state of affairs. showing that he preferred the current state of affairs.

The strongest opponents of the far-right parties in the European Parliament are the parties of the Socialist and Democratic (S&D) group. They generally favour enlargement not only due to its strategic necessity, but also out of a values-based approach framed around justice and political responsibility, which is sometimes defined as a moral duty. Among them are Finland’s Social Democratic Party (Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue, SDP – S&D) and Luxembourg’s Socialist Workers’ Party (Lëtzebuerger Sozialistesche Aarbechterpartei, LSAP – S&D). The German SPD’s position is shaped primarily by its ideological and political commitment to European integration, but geopolitical factors affect its position too: the war in Ukraine and the growing influence of Russia in the EU’s neighbouring countries reinforced its support for enlargement.

The values-based perspective is common among the Greens as well. For instance, the Finnish Green League (Vihreät, VIHR – European Green Party) links enlargement to sustainability, democracy and the rule of law. In the Netherlands, GreenLeft (GroenLinks, GL – Greens/EFA) conditions enlargement towards the Western Balkans and Ukraine on the maintenance of core European values (democracy, human rights and the rule of law). Similarly, Germany’s Alliance 90/The Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, Greens – EFA) supports enlargement if grounded in the rule of law, democracy and the fight against corruption.

The values-based argument for enlargement is often present among parties of the Left, such as Greece's Coalition of the Radical Left–Progressive Alliance (Syriza – The Left), who support enlargement in principle but emphasise cooperation, peace, and European unity as central goals. Syriza advocates for EU accession for the Western Balkans and Eastern European countries, aligning its pro-European stance with principles of alter-globalisation. However, more often, as explained later, the parties belonging to the Left group have significant economic concerns around labour rights and the risk of social dumping.

Finally, there are also instances of alliances between the far right and far left, as in the case of the Communist Party of Greece (Kommunistikó Kómma Elládas, KKE – Non-Inscrits) which rejects enlargement on ideological grounds, prioritising sovereignty, national identity, and anti-capitalist principles over strategic or economic considerations. Other examples include the Workers' Party of Belgium (Parti du travail de Belgique / Partij van de Arbeid van België, PVDA/PTB – The Left) which questions the potential negative consequences of enlargement for workers.

## **Migration and EU enlargement**

The issue of migration is politically sensitive and polarising across most EU member states, and is one of the strongest ideological concerns in the debate over enlargement. Fear of migratory flows from and across the region is regularly cited by centre-right and far-right parties in their arguments against enlargement. Even parties traditionally supportive of the EU and the enlargement process often adopt a cautious stance, aware of the potential for public backlash if the topic enters domestic electoral debates.

The association between migration and EU enlargement has been analysed in relation to the previous enlargements in 2004 and 2007, and alongside current demographic trends and labour market shortages in EU member states.<sup>15</sup> Consistent migration flows took place during the 1990s as a consequence of the Yugoslav wars and continued over the following decades.<sup>16</sup> Ukraine has accounted for the majority of recent migration from a candidate country: over four million Ukrainian refugees are hosted in the EU under the Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC) – a mechanism introduced in 2001 following the end of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, but used for the first time after Russia's large-scale invasion in 2022. The directive has allowed member states to quickly respond to the humanitarian needs of Ukrainians, granting them residence permits, access to employment, housing, medical care and education. Renewed annually since 2022, it is currently in place until March 2027.<sup>17</sup>

Political parties across the EU tend to divide into two camps: those that link enlargement to negative consequences due to the expected increase in migration flows, and those that do not associate enlargement and migration or even see migration from candidate countries as a positive, or at least manageable, phenomenon.

Far-right parties across Europe are the most likely to associate EU enlargement with migration-related risks. These narratives typically refer to threats to national identity, and labour market and welfare disruption. In the Netherlands, for instance, where strong political sensitivities exist around migration, right-wing populist parties such as the Party for Freedom (PVV, PfiE) and Forum for Democracy (Forum voor Democratie, FVD – ESN) link enlargement to immigration, loss of national identity and control. Similar examples include the FPÖ in Austria, AfD in Germany, and RN in France.

Even in the Baltics, the Latvian centre-right nationalist New Unity party expressed scepticism about enlargement from a migration standpoint.

### Returns of Ukrainian refugees vs. attracting Balkan citizens

Lately, in Central Europe, right-wing governments have become increasingly vocal about sending Ukrainian refugees back home. In the Czech Republic, for instance, anti-Ukrainian rhetoric is shared by the governing coalition led by Babiš's Yes 2011 party Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (Akce Nespokojených Občanů ANO – Pře), with the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy party (Svoboda a přímá demokracie, SPD – ESN) and the new party Motorists for Themselves (Motoristé sobě, AUTO – Pře). In Poland, where concerns over Ukrainian migrants have become visible in public discourse, especially in conservative circles, President Karol Nawrocki (PiS, ECR) aggressively campaigned against Ukrainian refugees, contributing to the waning of sympathy towards them in the country.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, there is debate in the Council over how to devise strategies to encourage the voluntary return of Ukrainian refugees, or, if they intend to remain in the EU, to transition them to a different legal status.<sup>19</sup>

There are also countries, such as Estonia, where Ukrainian refugees, who have arrived in large numbers, are broadly seen as integrating well and filling labour market gaps. As such, migration is not generally framed by mainstream parties as a major concern in enlargement debates. In Spain, despite its broader anti-immigration stance, the far-right Vox party has not explicitly linked enlargement to migration. In Romania, migration is not a major factor in national enlargement discourse, likely due to limited refugee inflows.

The Balkans, meanwhile, has seen significant emigration of workers to EU countries, who in

turn generally welcome them on the basis that white Europeans are seen as preferable to non-white immigrants. The resulting labour drain has created a critical situation for the Balkans' economies.<sup>20</sup> For instance, in Germany, the former governing "traffic light" ("Ampel") coalition – formed by SPD, the Greens and the liberal FDP – signed labour mobility agreements with several Western Balkan countries aimed at attracting their workforce.<sup>21</sup> In Austria too the Social Democratic Party of Austria (Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs, SPÖ – S&D) approaches migration from the Western Balkans as manageable and even beneficial, but more caution is expressed regarding eastern candidates like Ukraine and Moldova. The strategy of the Dutch centre-left, PvdA-GroenLinks alliance (S&D/Greens), which advocates for enlargement, avoids public association with migration issues due to the toxic nature of public discourse.

More ambivalent are the cases of Croatia and Slovenia. Their cultural, linguistic, and historical ties to the Western Balkans facilitate political and public acceptance of labour migration from the region, and they do not perceive enlargement as a migration threat.

Nonetheless, the historical experience of the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia regularly generates new controversies among former Federation members. An example was the elimination of 25,000 non-ethnic Slovenian former Yugoslav citizens from Slovenian population registers in the 1990s, turning many of them into stateless people.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, in Croatia, where a large section of the population – notably the overwhelming majority of the Serbian minority – experienced ethnic cleansing in the 1990s, there is no openness to return to an ethnically plural society. Yet immigration from the so-called Global South is already de facto changing the ethnic composition of the country.

## The Balkan route and the externalisation of migration

It is the so-called Balkan migratory route that raises major concerns, given that it is crossed every year by tens of thousands of non-European migrants. During the accession process, the European Commission encouraged candidate countries to adopt EU asylum provisions and process asylum requests.

Non-European migrants generally reach the Western Balkans after crossing the EU member states of first access, namely Greece or Bulgaria. They tend to avoid seeking asylum there, as their primary goal is to reach Northern Europe. Those two member states generally do not process migrants' requests as they prefer to let them continue the journey. Thus, thousands of migrants remain stranded in the Western Balkans trying repeatedly to cross other EU borders heading north. This generates instability in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, as stranded migrants end up overburdening the local infrastructure, while smuggling networks expand, producing social and political friction within local communities. This is a dynamic that European political parties rarely acknowledge.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, it is clear that migrants crossing the region are not interested in presenting their demand for protection to any of the countries of South East Europe, whether they be member states or candidate countries. Thus, we may conclude that the EU's efforts to externalise asylum demands in candidate countries are doomed to fail, given that migrants who do not file their application in Greece would not settle in Serbia as an alternative.<sup>24</sup>

But, again, most political parties in the EU prefer to ignore the evidence. This is all the more evident since the externalisation of asylum management to the Western Balkans took a step further with

the Protocol on the Management of Migration, signed in 2023 by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama. This agreement allows Italy to build and operate, at its own expense, migrant processing centers in Albania to manage asylum applications for people rescued at sea.

The deal attracted strong interest from other EU member states who saw it as an example of an "innovative partnership" with third countries to "alleviate domestic pressures". However, the agreement has so far failed to deliver the expected results, with only a very small number of migrants being held in newly built centres due to it violating current Italian and EU legislation.<sup>25</sup>

Albania accepted this collaboration in migration management in part as a strategic move to facilitate its accession negotiations. However, its role as a "migrant keeper" outside of the EU depends on its status as a non-EU state. Thus, by fulfilling this externalisation role, Albania risks a stall in its accession process, as its utility to the EU as a buffer zone would vanish the moment it achieves its goal of membership.

## Geopolitical divides

Following the outbreak of the large-scale war in Ukraine, the enlargement process was relaunched as a geopolitical endeavor. Over the years, EU policy has been increasingly framed, across political parties of EU member states, as a strategic instrument rather than a political or technical process.<sup>26</sup> Russia's war against Ukraine pushed security considerations to the forefront of EU debates. The focus has shifted towards countering external threats to European security that include China, Turkey, and, recently, the US.

Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine has become the central driver of EU enlargement debates,

sharply redefining the Union's geopolitical ambitions.<sup>27</sup> For most member states, Ukraine's potential accession is described as both a moral imperative and a strategic necessity: it would demonstrate EU solidarity, uphold international law, and strengthen collective security against Russian aggression.

Within the largest countries, however, the political spectrum is nonetheless divided. France and Germany largely interpret Ukraine's prospective accession through a geopolitical lens, viewing enlargement as a strategic instrument to counter Russian influence and uphold the EU's credibility as a security actor. In France, the war has revived long-standing debates over European strategic autonomy. Liberal and socialist parties support Ukraine's European path as a means to stabilise the eastern neighbourhood and reinforce the rules-based international order, while the far-right *Rassemblement National* (Pfe) and the far-left France Unbowed (La France Insoumise, FI, – GUE/NGL) both oppose deeper integration, but from different ideological positions.

Germany similarly frames enlargement as a geopolitical necessity, emphasising its role for European security and the importance of anchoring Ukraine within the EU's political and normative framework. Both CDU/CSU and SPD view Kyiv's accession as part of a broader strategy to deter Russia, reduce zones of instability, and demonstrate European resolve, while safeguarding institutional cohesion.

In Italy the right-wing governing coalition is divided between supporters of Kyiv – such as Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia, Fdi – ECR) and Go Italy – and League (Lega, LSP – Pfe), an arch Eurosceptic with a pro-Russian leaning. The populist Five Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle, M5S – The Left] and the Greens and Left coalition (Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra, AVS -

The Green) are meanwhile concerned with the military build-up in the EU and advocate for a diplomatic solution to the war in Ukraine.

In essence, while EU political parties diverge significantly in terms of how they interpret geopolitical issues, the main elements that instead explains coherent responses at national level are: historical experiences with Russia's imperialism, domestic economic constraints but also geography: the proximity or the distance from Russian borders influence the perception of the risk and the response to prepare.

### Geographical proximity to Russia and the role of regionalism

Countries that are geographically distant from Russia or the Balkans tend to align with a mainstream view of the EU's strategic priority. Ireland, Spain and Portugal are less directly engaged, viewing Ukraine primarily through the lens of EU solidarity and global stability rather than immediate national security. They frame support for Ukraine in terms of solidarity, international law, and the defence of a rules-based order challenged by Russia's invasion. A smaller and geographically peripheral state such as Malta meanwhile adopts a cautious, pragmatic position, acknowledging the geopolitical stakes while prioritising consensus and the EU's absorption capacity.

For countries on the EU's eastern flank, enlargement is closely associated with collective security concerns that are shared throughout the entire political spectrum. Many among them feel particularly vulnerable as a result of both direct exposure to instability – as with the large refugee flows from Ukraine, or via direct attacks on territorial integrity by Moscow – and indirect exposure due to Russian interference in domestic democratic processes.

The Baltic and the Nordic countries exemplify this trend. All mainstream parties in the Baltic states are proactive supporters of Ukrainian integration. Historical experiences of Soviet occupation, combined with geographic proximity to Russia, heightened their perception of an existential threat. For more than two decades, all Lithuanian parties have supported Ukraine politically and diplomatically, while strong public backing for EU enlargement reinforces the government's advocacy for fast-track accession. In Estonia, partisan divisions around strengthening European cooperation to counter Russian aggression are minimal; instead, there is broad consensus around increasing defence spending and supporting Ukraine's EU path, subject to compliance with accession criteria. Latvian parties similarly prioritise regional security, framing enlargement as a means to prevent Russian influence from advancing westwards.

Parties in Finland, Denmark and Sweden also interpret Ukrainian accession primarily through a security lens that is closely linked to deterring Russian aggression. Finland's long border with Russia illustrates a strong cross-party consensus on the strategic importance of enlargement as a tool to strengthen regional security and consolidate a rules-based European order. Differences emerge regarding the timeline of the accession, the economic guarantees to their stakeholders, and the EU's absorption capacity.

Denmark, following the 2022 abolition of its defence opt-out, has adopted a similar approach, linking enlargement to the EU's ability to act decisively in security matters and enhance its strategic capacity. Security is defined broadly, encompassing not only military defence but also economic resilience, democratic governance, and resistance to authoritarian influence.

In Sweden, enlargement is not a highly salient domestic issue, although mainstream parties increasingly recognise that it must be accompanied by broader security considerations at the European level. Thus, they generally view Ukraine's accession as strengthening European security and democratic resilience in the Baltic Sea region.

By contrast, several Central and Eastern European states are divided between those that adopt a cautious approach and those that have openly hostile positions. Poland, historically one of Ukraine's closest allies, continues to support Kyiv, but domestic political considerations increasingly constrain its position. Although the coalition led by Donald Tusk's Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO – EPP) seeks to use enlargement to counter Russian military power, growing public concerns over EU funds, migration, and agricultural competition have tempered political enthusiasm.

Hungary under Viktor Orbán actively blocked Ukraine's accession, citing domestic security concerns, migration, and the treatment of Hungarian minorities in Ukraine.<sup>28</sup> Fidesz party framed its stance as a defence of national sovereignty while maintaining cooperative relations with Russia. The party that defeated Fidesz in the April 2026 elections, Tisza (EPP), also opposes fast-track accession and military aid, but it unequivocally condemns Russia's invasion and advocates closer alignment with the EU.

Slovakia exhibits more marked internal divisions. The ruling SMER party favours maintaining relations with Moscow and opposes military support for Kyiv, while opposition parties such as Progressive Slovakia (Progresívne Slovensko, PS – Renew Europe) strongly endorse Ukraine's integration, reflecting ideological and generational cleavages. A comparable dynamic

is visible in Czechia, where the new far-right governing coalition composed of ANO, SPD, and Motorists for Themselves (Motoristé sobě – PfE) has shifted policy away from the strongly pro-Ukrainian stance of the previous Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana, ODS – EPP)-led government.

Romania and Bulgaria also display more ambivalent positions that are shaped by historical ties and concerns about provoking Russia. In Romania, the governing Social Democrats (Partidul Social Democrat, PSD – S&D) hold internally divided views on Ukrainian accession, resulting in cautious and inconsistent messaging. In Bulgaria, while mainstream parties broadly support assistance to Ukraine, pro-Russian and anti-EU forces such as Revival (Vazrazhdane – ESN) have gained political traction.

Across the rest of Southeastern Europe – including Austria, Croatia, and Slovenia – mainstream political parties support Ukraine's accession as part of a wider effort to limit Russian destabilisation in the EU's neighbourhood, particularly in relation to the Western Balkans, although pro-Russian voices are gaining ground.<sup>29</sup>

Through a geopolitical lens, regionalism appears as one factor that defines politics and security priorities among member states. There are regionalist stances that also concern the Benelux area, where, for instance, Luxembourg's general position aligns closely with its partners, Belgium and the Netherlands. They support Ukraine's EU membership, backing its candidate status and continued accession talks while stressing the need for rule of law reforms and institutional readiness before full membership. This attitude of Luxembourg ensures a policy coherence that amplifies its voice as a small state.

## China, Turkey and the US

Russia is not the only preoccupation of member states: China is increasingly perceived as a destabilising actor, especially in the Western Balkans, thereby reinforcing the idea that enlargement is a geopolitical necessity. The combination of Russian political influence, energy leverage, and support for nationalist actors in the EU with China's expanding economic and infrastructural presence drives concern among mainstream parties across Europe. This is especially so among those advocating greater respect for the Copenhagen criteria, given that China and Russia could undermine democratic governance and fragment regional alignment with EU norms.<sup>30</sup>

The erratic position of the current US administration also presents a challenge to the EU-US tandem in the region, with implications for the stabilisation in the Balkans and the defense of Ukraine. The American preference for bilateral and transactional approaches with individual candidate countries is alarming EU governments that are engaged in the process. The Trump administration's invitation to Albania and Kosovo to join the newly formed Board of Peace does not necessarily signal a US preference regarding the conflict with Serbia but might influence it. Furthermore, the participation in the Board of Peace of two EU member states (Hungary and Bulgaria) plus the observer status held by eight others (Italy, Romania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Greece, Cyprus, Poland, and Austria) risks deepening European foreign policy divisions, including with regards to enlargement.<sup>31</sup>

Turkey occupies a distinct position in EU enlargement debates. Although accession negotiations have been effectively frozen since 2018 and no member state actively advocates their resumption in the short or medium term,

Turkey's geopolitical relevance prevents it from being marginalised entirely. Unresolved territorial disputes – most notably the occupation of Northern Cyprus – and concerns over unilateral actions in the Eastern Mediterranean continue to shape member states' approaches to enlargement more broadly.

Greece and Cyprus consistently frame Turkey's EU trajectory as a security and sovereignty issue, viewing enlargement as a means to constrain revisionist actors rather than as a neutral integration process. Across the Greek political spectrum – from New Democracy (Nea Dimokratia, ND – EPP) and Panhellenic Socialist Movement (Pasok – S&D) to Syriza (PEL), as well as far-right and far-left forces – enlargement policy is leveraged to protect national interests, particularly in relation to maritime disputes. As for Cyprus, which views enlargement through the lens of its own territorial division and longstanding conflict with Turkey, most parties perceive its own accession without full territorial control as precedent-setting for unresolved disputes.

Regional interests and specific security concerns have an ambivalent role to play: they can deepen rifts between different groups of countries pursuing contrasting goals if they fail to mediate between the perspectives, therefore weakening the EU. However, if everyone's sensitivities were taken into account and mediated in the interests of all, we would have an EU capable of expanding to the East while also caring about other relations such as those with the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

## Historical factors and bilateral issues

Among the strongest predictors of a country's stance in European politics is its historical experience. In some cases, that experience pushes most political parties to share a vision of the past that shapes the choices of the present. As already highlighted, a pro-enlargement approach is shared in the Baltic states due to a common interpretation of Russian imperial ambitions. Meanwhile, the successful EU integration experiences of countries such as Ireland and Luxembourg, despite the radically different historical path, explain why many of their political parties advocate enlargement.

Luxembourg has long been one of the EU's most consistent advocates of integration. The outsized international standing this small state holds, and its history as a mediator between France and Germany, has fostered a political culture where pro-European sentiment is mainstream. For its part, Ireland's political class and wider public frame enlargement as a natural continuation of the country's EU's success story since 1973, which is associated with economic development and political stability. This positive experience translates into broad and consistent support for further enlargement, especially from centre-right to centre-left parties, including the governing Soldiers of Destiny (Fianna Fáil, FF – Renew Europe) and Family of the Irish (Fine Gael, FG – EPP).

On the contrary, a few bilateral disputes and historical grievances, rooted in past territorial shifts, or connected with the presence of minorities, have emerged as sources of tension hampering the enlargement process. While these concerns are normally the domain of right-wing parties that place ethnic and cultural identity at the heart of their platforms, in many cases they are shared across the political spectrum. They serve to strengthen

patriotic sentiments or reinforce ties with a party's traditional constituency, or function as a "bargaining chip" to gain greater leverage on the international stage.

Among the candidates, Ukraine – and, to a lesser extent, Moldova – face several unresolved issues that could become obstacles to their accession to the Union if not adequately addressed. Ukraine's relations with Hungary over EU enlargement are particularly strained. Since 2010, Fidesz has been actively pursuing kin-state policies and strategies aimed at Hungarian transborder minorities in neighbouring countries. The rights of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine constitute one of the key issues raised by Orbán to oppose Ukraine's accession to the EU. In particular, amendments to Ukrainian legislation on language use in schools and public spaces – allegedly restricting the fundamental rights of Hungarian minorities – have been the cause of strain between the two countries since 2017, with tensions intensifying further following Russia's full-scale invasion.

Orbán's efforts to position himself as a protector of Hungarian communities abroad have also affected relations with Romania, and these dynamics, in turn, influence Hungary's stance on Moldova's accession. Given Moldova's close national, cultural, historical, and linguistic ties with Romania, Orbán has argued that Moldova's entry into the EU would fuel "Romanian chauvinism," leading him to oppose – or at least remain sceptical toward – its membership as well.

Despite the presence of historical disputes and minority-related controversies, Fidesz has adopted a markedly different approach toward the Western Balkans, particularly Serbia, where it has actively promoted enlargement. These policies could shift if the main opposition party,

Tisza, were to win elections. However, such change would likely be gradual, as many Tisza members politically originate from Fidesz, share some of its views, and operate within an electorate shaped by 15 years of Fidesz government and rhetoric.

Similar dynamics characterised relations between Romania and Ukraine: bilateral issues related to language legislation existed, but these were largely set aside following Russia's invasion, and Romanian parties broadly support Ukraine's accession to the EU. Regarding Moldova, for most Romanian parties, the two countries' shared historical and linguistic ties constitute a strong argument in favour of Moldova's EU accession. The prospect of a union with Romania is commonly discussed in the Moldovan political scene, with even President Maia Sandu recently backing the idea. However, the national-conservative Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor, AUR – PFE), which does not regard Moldova as a sovereign state, has gotten to the point of advocating for its annexation by Romania. As a consequence, due to his nationalist rhetoric, its leader George Simion has been labelled *persona non grata* in Moldova.

Diplomatic controversies in the context of enlargement talks emerged between Poland and Ukraine around the issue of the Volhynia massacres, which took place in northern Ukraine during World War II and involved episodes of interethnic violence. Polish President Karol Nawrocki of PiS repeatedly stated that he would veto Ukraine's accession if the Volhynia issue was not resolved, a position that came as a surprise given Poland's strong support for Ukraine in the context of Russian aggression.

However, as a right-wing political force, PiS traditionally places strong emphasis on issues related to national identity and national pride.

The far-right Confederation party (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość, or Konfederacja, KWiN – ESN) has also raised the topic of the Volhynian massacres in public debates, framing it in a more explicitly anti-Ukrainian manner, while the centre-left PO is generally considered more accommodating on the issue – although a member of one of its allies, Minister of Defence Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz of the Polish People's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL – EPP), has echoed Nawrocki's stance. In 2024, Ukraine and Poland reached an agreement on the exhumation of the bodies of victims of the Volhynian massacres and on fostering national reconciliation over the long-standing dispute between the two countries.<sup>32</sup>

Historical disputes also shape the negative attitudes of Greece and Cyprus toward Turkey's potential accession, with the latter's position further exacerbated by unresolved territorial issues, as well as by Greece's relations with two Western Balkan countries: North Macedonia and Albania. Greece has traditionally insisted on the resolution of bilateral disputes with historical and cultural dimensions as a prerequisite for backing EU accession with the two countries. As for North Macedonia, in 2018 Syriza took a path of pragmatism and flexibility and signed the Prespa Agreement, which recognised the identity and language of ethnic Macedonians and formally ended the so-called "name dispute", with the candidate country changing to "Republic of North Macedonia". Greece's ND party, which then won the Greek parliamentary elections in June 2019, voted against its ratification in a bid to appease its supporters.

As for Albania, tensions persist over issues such as maritime borders in the Ionian Sea, and the repatriation and property rights of Cham Albanians, who were expelled from the Greek region of Epirus during World War II. A recent episode of tension between the Greek ruling

party and Tirana stemmed from the arrest and conviction of ethnic Greek politician Fredi Beleri in Albania for vote buying. This came after he was elected mayor of Himarë in 2023, and it prevented him from taking office.<sup>33</sup> Athens viewed the case as politically motivated and in violation of the rights of the Greek minority, raising concerns over the rule of law. Tensions escalated when Beleri was elected to the European Parliament on the New Democracy party list, prompting a legal and diplomatic debate over parliamentary immunity. The issue eased only when the Albanian authorities allowed him to travel to Strasbourg to take up his seat as an MEP in 2024, effectively closing the case at the national level but causing lingering political friction between the two countries. While mainstream Greek parties appear sceptical but nevertheless open to the enlargement process, the national conservative and right-wing populist Greek Solution (Ellinikí Lýsi, EL – ECR) explicitly opposes integration of Albania and North Macedonia, since it considers them threats to national identity, sovereignty and social cohesion.

Similarly, bilateral issues between North Macedonia and Bulgaria have long created friction over European enlargement, with Bulgaria insisting on the constitutional recognition of Bulgarian minorities' rights in North Macedonia. While all parties in Bulgaria partake in this conflict, the far-right Vazrazhdane reached the point of proposing the unification of North Macedonia with Bulgaria as two "Bulgarian states". The new North Macedonian government led by the center-right party Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPNE – EPP) meanwhile adopted a less compromising stance on the matter and has refused to change the constitution, something that the European Council now includes among the condition to opening accession negotiations.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, the condition of Bulgarian minorities in Serbia is gradually becoming an additional source of dispute although it has not yet become as salient as in the case of North Macedonia.

In the Western Balkans more broadly, unresolved conflicts stemming from the violent dissolution of Yugoslavia continue to cast a long shadow over enlargement, but so too do quarrels over older issues. In June 2024, for instance, the Montenegrin parliament adopted a resolution condemning the crimes committed during World War II in the Croatian camp of Jasenovac, an act which was perceived by Zagreb as a hostile political gesture aimed at directly targeting Croatian national memory.

Another example is the issue of the ethnic cleansing of the Serbian minority in Croatia at the end of the war in 1995, during the so-called Oluja (Storm) military operation. The annual celebration in Croatia regularly causes friction with Serbia, and although Croatian political elites have not made formal diplomatic references to the historical grievances connected to the wars in the 1990s as a factor in EU accession, the need for serious reconciliation and for addressing historical narratives is considered part of the process of normalisation with Serbia. Serbian commentators meanwhile often question Croatian representatives' role in Serbia-related EU dialogue.<sup>35</sup>

Besides that, it is to be noted that Croatia has open dossiers on shared borders with all its neighbouring countries: with Serbia, the border along the Danube is not well defined; with Bosnia and Herzegovina, the border issue near Neum is similarly unresolved; meanwhile, the maritime border between Croatia and Montenegro is yet to be tackled.

One specific case that can be included among the bilateral disputes to have emerged from the dissolution of Yugoslavia is the unresolved

issue of Kosovo's independence. Five member states (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) do not recognise Kosovo as a sovereign state, leaving the former Yugoslav province as the only Western Balkans country that still has the status of potential candidate country.

In Spain, only the Sumar (Unite) coalition (The Left, The Greens/EFA) might be ready to change position on Kosovo's independence. In all other cases, there are no signs that positions will change. In Greece all mainstream parties like New Democracy, Pasok or Syriza hold on to their traditional position of not recognising Kosovo. The same goes for Romania, with the possible exception of Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania Uniunea Democrata Maghiara din Romania, UDMR – EPP) which backed Kosovo's independence out of its own wish for more autonomy in the country. Political parties in Cyprus are also firm in their refusal to recognise Kosovo, given the potential implications in a country divided over an unresolved territorial issue. The far-right ELAM, Cyprus's principal Eurosceptic party, is additionally hostile towards Kosovo's majoritarian Muslim identity.

In Slovakia, the issue of Kosovo's independence is rarely discussed among political parties. It can be argued that opposition to it would ease in the event of a significant improvement in relations between Kosovo and Serbia. This stalemate has negative consequences as it excludes Kosovo from many organisations, initiatives and political opportunities, thus worsening prospects for resolving the political conflict with Serbia.

## Economic dimension and EU enlargement

The countries analysed in this study display varied political approaches and positions regarding the potential economic impacts of EU enlargement. However, within their national or party-level discussions, some countries appear not to hold well-defined positions on the subject. Some even barely discuss it at all. However, of the issues to have emerged as salient in public debates, the most substantial is the impact of enlargement on EU agriculture and farmers.

### Sector competition: The impact of Ukrainian agriculture

Looking at interests' representation is important when examining the positions of European political parties. Where direct sectoral competition with candidate countries exists, or is foreseen, political parties tend to adopt more cautious, sceptical, or even oppositional positions toward enlargement. Among the most vocal stakeholders raising doubts about the consequences of further enlargement are farmers' organisations in Poland, France, Slovakia, Hungary and Italy. Their concerns emerge in discussions around Ukraine's competitiveness in the agricultural sector.

To remedy the disruption to Ukrainian agricultural exports along the Black Sea shipping routes, the EU devised so-called "solidarity lanes" that help the country redirect its exports westward, with overland corridors through Central Europe and river routes along the Danube. According to EU agricultural unions, however, this choice created market distortions, particularly in grain and wheat production as a result of the large volumes of Ukrainian produce and its competitive prices, especially at a time when domestic producers were facing rising fuel costs, labour shortages, climate-related losses

and stricter environmental rules under the EU Green Deal.<sup>36</sup>

Protests began in 2024, with Polish farmers blocking border crossings with Ukraine. They then spread to neighbouring countries before taking hold across the EU. With farmers demanding a ban on the import of Ukrainian agricultural products, the issue became salient and all political parties had to respond to growing concerns and farmers' protests regardless of their political stance on enlargement. The brandishing of the issue by nationalist parties ultimately eroded support for enlargement among sections of the public.

In Poland, the current pro-EU government led by the Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska, KO – EPP/S&D/Renew Europe), the centrist-conservative Third Way coalition (Trzecia Droga, TD – EPP/Renew Europe) and The Left (Lewica – S&D) seeks to reconcile support for Ukraine's EU path with compensation measures for Polish farmers and vulnerable sectors. Far-right forces such as Confederation (Konfederacja – NI) use agricultural issues instead to reinforce their Eurosceptic narrative.

In the Czech Republic, political parties generally support enlargement, but with a degree of caution. Andrej Babiš, who owns the country's largest agri-business, has moved ANO party towards the Eurosceptic far right and increasingly questions EU policies on Ukraine, budgetary priorities and green regulation. Similarly, in Slovakia, despite support for Ukraine's accession in principle, concerns exist about how European funds for agriculture will be redistributed among member states after Ukraine joins the EU.

Similar apprehensions have arisen in Bulgaria and Romania's agricultural sectors. In Bulgaria, the pro-European coalition Citizens for

European Development of Bulgaria (GERB – EPP), the reformist alliance (We Continue the Change–Democratic Bulgaria (PP–DB – RE/EPP-aligned) and the liberal Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS – formerly RE) do not in principle oppose Ukraine’s accession, but try to respond to sectoral interest groups and protests. The Bulgarian Socialist Party (Bulgarska Sotsialisticheska Partiya, BSP – S&D) has adopted a cautious position that swings between support for Ukraine and the social and economic costs of doing so. Finally, the Eurosceptic party Vazrazhdane uses the issue of agriculture to argue that EU policies and future enlargement can harm Bulgarian farmers and national sovereignty.

In Romania, the Social Democratic Party (Partidul Social Democrat, PSD – S&D) and the National Liberal Party (Partidul Național Liberal, PNL – EPP) support negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova but have called for safeguarding measures and compensation for the agricultural impact. The Save Romania Union (Uniunea Salva România, USR – Renew Europe) emphasises rule of law conditionality and addresses EU-level regulation to manage agricultural competition. The radical right AUR has used farmers’ discontent to reinforce nationalist and protectionist rhetoric.

In Finland, some parties, especially the Centre Party (Keskusta – Renew Europe), Finnish Christian Democrats (*Suomen Kristillisdemokraatit*, SK – EPP) and the right-wing Finns Party (*Perussuomalaiset*, P – ECR), have expressed doubts about the potential strain on the EU budget and negative consequences for the Finnish agricultural sector. In Estonia, while economic concerns are not prominent in the political discourse on enlargement, there is some caution around agricultural funding, although the level of concern is lower than in Romania or Poland.

Only a few countries saw mainstream parties neglecting the issue or considering it manageable overall. In Belgium, despite the strong voice of the agricultural sector in EU policy debates, political parties and farming groups do not focus much on the structural economic effects of future enlargement. Similarly, Ireland’s pro-enlargement governing parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, do not currently fear the economic impacts of enlargement.

### **Economic ties and regional stability as priorities for neighbouring Western Balkans countries**

Conversely, another group of countries – those that are generally not seen as significant economic competitors – perceives enlargement, as it relates to the Western Balkans, as a strategic economic opportunity. Austria and Hungary, for example, have strong economic ties with the Western Balkans, which influences their support for enlargement. A Hungarian bank owns one of Montenegro’s largest financial institutions, and such ties are presented as strategic arguments for integration. Similarly, Austria’s business presence in the Western Balkans reinforces its pro-enlargement stance.

The support of Italy’s right wing toward Western Balkan enlargement is also underpinned by significant commercial relationships in the region. Go Italy and the Brothers of Italy view enlargement as beneficial to national economic interests, as it does the reconstruction of Ukraine.

Although Greece is not particularly proactive at the political level, its mainstream parties, such as New Democracy, Pasok and Syriza, support enlargement, even if detailed economic discussions, particularly around trade, remain limited.

## Conditions for accession to counter a race to the bottom

A third cluster of countries comprises those where enlargement debates on economic factors focus more on *conditions for accession* rather than direct domestic concerns. In Portugal, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands most political parties tend to examine the candidate countries' ability to meet EU economic, fiscal and regulatory standards, such as market reforms, sound public finances and respect of labour rights. Fears of immediate threats to their national economies from enlargement are less of a concern.

This approach tends to align with a merit-based and rule-based perspective, commonly associated with pro-European parties, that is particularly visible among green and liberal forces – for instance, Sweden's The Green League (Vihreä liitto, Vihr – Greens/EFA) and Germany's Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, which support the accession of the Western Balkans, Ukraine and Moldova while insisting on strong conditionality, respect for the rule of law and a more federal, climate-oriented Union.

As for the parties of the Left, they criticise the EU for its market driven model and question the impact of enlargement in terms of a race to the bottom with regards to labour rights. They would like to see the EU first reform itself to ensure social justice-oriented values are in place before accepting new members. For instance, left parties in countries such as Denmark (Red-Green Alliance, or Enhedslisten-De Rød-Grønne – GUE), Luxembourg (Déi Lénk – GUE) and Finland (Vasemmistoliitto, or Vas – GUE) are open to Ukraine's and the Western Balkans' accession. Nevertheless they criticise what they see as neoliberal economic approaches that sacrifice labour and human rights in favor of the militarisation of the Union. They all call for

the strengthening of workers' rights, democratic accountability, and social justice, insisting that enlargement should go hand in hand with EU reforms.

Concerns regarding labour market competition and the broader economic implications of enlargement are also advanced by some mainstream parties in countries such as Sweden. There, all parties, including the Social Democrats, are sensitive to the risk of social dumping and the erosion of public services. Similarly, in Ireland, both Sinn Féin (GUE/NGL) and the Labour Party (S&D) expressed concerns about the need to protect domestic labour standards. In Malta, both Labour (S&D) and the Nationalist Party (EPP) expressed concern about labour competition. The argument might be framed in different ways according to the political leaning of the party – as, for instance, in Luxembourg, where the Socialist Workers' Party (Lëtzebuerger sozialistesche Aarbechterpartei, LSAP – S&D), The Greens (Déi Gréng – Greens/EFA), and The Left (Déi Lénk – GUE/NGL) prioritise fair transitions and workers' rights, while the right-leaning Alternative Democratic Reform Party (ADR – ECR) warns of disruptions to labour markets and national autonomy.

Finally, those member states that currently receive higher levels of EU funding fear the loss of cohesion funds due to the accession of new member states. Some of their political parties advance arguments against further enlargement on the basis that their share of resources will be reduced and redistributed in the future. For instance, the Portuguese Communist Party (Partido Comunista Português, PCP – GUE/NGL) explicitly highlights the economic implications of enlargement and warns that rapid or poorly managed accession could penalise the country by reducing its structural funding or creating institutional strains.

Several other political parties and groups across EU member states have expressed concerns that enlargement, particularly Ukraine's accession, will divert EU funds and place financial burdens and consequences on current members.<sup>37</sup> But concern over the financial impact of Ukraine's accession isn't limited to net beneficiaries of cohesion funds. In France, both the far-right RN and left-wing France Unbowed (La France Insoumise - LFI, the Left GUE/NGL) raise the issue. This view is, however, mostly a preoccupation of far-right parties, such as Germany's AfD, Romania's AUR, Finland's Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset, PS - ECR) and Netherlands' PVV.

### **Institutional reforms and EU enlargement**

With geopolitical pressure for enlargement having grown following Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, so too have calls increased to reform the EU's decision-making system to ensure that an enlarged Union of up to 36 member states can function.

A critical debate regarding the future governance of an enlarged Union concerns the replacing of unanimity with Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in the EU's decision-making process. This is particularly so in sensitive policy areas such as foreign policy, security, and enlargement-related decisions. As the prospect of further enlargement gains momentum, the limitations deriving from unanimity have become increasingly evident, raising concerns about institutional gridlock and the EU's capacity to act decisively in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, enlargement is no longer viewed solely as a technical or normative process, but rather as a strategic geopolitical instrument aimed at stabilising the EU's

neighbourhood, countering external influence, and strengthening the Union's role in its neighbourhood. This reframing has intensified political debate within and across member states, as parties are compelled to balance the need for greater efficiency, coherence, and credibility in EU action against the preservation of national sovereignty and democratic control.

Out of the resulting tension, three broad political blocs have emerged: first is those advocating a move towards QMV as a prerequisite for an effective enlarged Union; second is those defending unanimity as an essential safeguard of national interests; third is a more cautious group that recognises the need for reform but favours incremental or selective changes rather than a comprehensive overhaul of the decision-making system.

### **The pro-Qualified Majority Voting bloc**

Acknowledging the risk of institutional paralysis in a Union of more than 30 members, the pro-Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) bloc advocates a shift in decision-making procedures, linking widening to a deepening of the Union for a variety of reasons.

Germany and France have been the primary drivers of this position, viewing QMV as a strategic necessity for the functioning of the EU. This conviction gained traction following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and for a while it impacted on the positioning of centre-right, liberal, and centre-left parties in both countries. This included Ensemble (Renew) and the PS in France, as well as the SPD and CDU/CSU in Germany. In 2023, the French and German governments convened the so-called Group of 12, a "working group on EU institutional reforms"<sup>39</sup> tasked with outlining options for reforming the EU alongside enlargement.

This approach is opposed by far-right parties in both countries – such as RN and AfD – and far-left parties, including *LFI* and The Left (Die Linke – GUE/NGL). The former fear an erosion of national competency and identities with a Union capable of adopting more common decisions. The latter meanwhile oppose a social and economic market-driven model that, in their view, would become even more entrenched through a shift to QMV.

Under pressure from opposing sides, and recognising the difficulty of reaching a general consensus among the 27 member states, Germany's CDU/CSU has begun to question the QMV option. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has been working for an alliance with hard-right Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, centered on finding solutions to stalemates in different policy areas based on intergovernmental agreements, commonly referred to as a variable-geometry EU or multi-speed EU. The consequence for candidate countries is likely to be that of the so-called “differentiated integration” – in other words, they would have access to specific EU policies, institutions, and the single market, but not full membership for the foreseeable future.<sup>40</sup>

The Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden), driven by the need for better coordinated security responses to Russian influence, pragmatically support QMV in selected areas of external action. This is particularly evident in two Nordic countries governed by markedly different coalitions. In Denmark, institutional adaptation is regarded by centre and centre-left parties, including the Social Democrats (S&D), Left (Venstre, V – ALDE), and the Moderates (Moderaterne – ALDE), as necessary to accommodate new members while safeguarding the Copenhagen criteria. In Finland, by contrast, it is the right-

wing government – comprising the National Coalition Party (EPP), the Finns Party (ECR), the Christian Democrats (EPP), and the Swedish People's Party (ALDE) – that supports extending QMV to selected policy areas, such as sanctions policy, but firmly opposes any reopening of the EU Treaties.

Pragmatic countries such as Belgium, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Spain support extensions of QMV to ensure a more stable and functional decision-making process, preventing individual member states from holding essential decisions hostage over bilateral disputes with candidate countries. Despite significant political differences within their governing coalitions – ranging from right and far-right governments in Belgium and Italy to left and green-left coalitions in Slovenia and Spain – this shared position was formalised with the creation of the so-called Group of Friends on Qualified Majority Voting in the Common Foreign and Security Policy<sup>41</sup> in May 2023. The group aims to advance decision-making “in a pragmatic way”, focusing on concrete, practical steps and building on provisions already contained in the treaties.

### **The pro-unanimity bloc**

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the pro-unanimity bloc regards the national veto as the final safeguard of national sovereignty and a crucial instrument for managing sensitive foreign and security interests.

Countries such as Greece and Cyprus fear losing their veto in accession-related decisions, particularly the leverage it provides in relations with Turkey. Although debates on EU institutional reform occupy a relatively low position on the domestic political agenda, Greece's mainstream parties – New Democracy and Pasok – view enlargement primarily as

a foreign policy tool rather than an issue of internal governance. A similar logic applies in Cyprus, where all mainstream parties, including the centrist and social democratic governing coalition – composed of the Democratic Party (Demokrat Parti, DIKO – S&D), EDEK Socialist Party (S&D), and Democratic Alignment (ALDE) – acknowledge the need for a more effective EU but prioritise the preservation of national sovereignty and security interests.

Despite the political instability that has characterised Bulgaria in recent years, there is a broad cross-party consensus in opposing QMV in enlargement-related policy areas, as it would entail losing veto power over decisions concerning North Macedonia's accession process. Only the Bulgarian Socialist Party shows a cautious openness to EU institutional reforms aimed at improving efficiency and democratic transparency, while insisting that candidate countries must fully meet all accession criteria.

While countries such as Malta, Czechia, and Slovakia prioritise preserving their current level of influence – as they believe QMV would reduce the relative weight of smaller states – Hungary under Viktor Orbán represents a distinct case. Orbán's Fidesz governing party (PfE) treats veto power as a high-value political instrument, to be deployed whenever EU decisions are perceived as undermining Hungarian government positions (for example, Ukraine's EU accession).<sup>42</sup> Orbán's approach has become a reference point for several far-right parties: among them are the Brothers of Italy, and parties of the Patriots for Europe political family, including Lega in Italy, RN in France, Chega in Portugal, the PVV in the Netherlands, Vlaams Belang in Belgium, Vox in Spain, and ANO in Slovakia.

## The cautious bloc

Between these two positions lies the cautious bloc, composed of member states that acknowledge the need for reform but favour a gradual approach. This is particularly evident in Poland, where the centre-right governing party Civic Platform (EPP) supports linking enlargement to institutional reform, while carefully balancing the challenges of integrating new members with changes to internal decision-making rules.

Mainstream parties in Austria – the ÖVP (EPP), SPÖ (S&D), and NEOS (ALDE) – and Portugal – the Social Democratic Party (EPP), the CDS–People's Party (EPP), and the Socialist Party (S&D) – adopt a cautiously pragmatic stance towards reform, recognising that an enlarged EU requires more adaptable decision-making mechanisms. However, there is no strong political push to prioritise changes to decision-making procedures, particularly given the growing strength of far-right, anti-Brussels sentiment in both countries. A notable exception is the Austrian liberal party New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS), which openly advocates a “United States of Europe”, albeit from its position as a junior coalition partner.

Croatia and Romania lack clearly articulated positions on QMV, instead displaying a form of passive resistance to institutional changes that might weaken their control over strict accession conditionality. Their focus remains primarily on the practical implications of enlargement, including relations with neighbouring candidate countries.

## Does the size of the country matter?

Enlargement debates intertwine with broader questions of sovereignty and the influence of smaller member states within the Union. In EU policymaking, large countries and economically stronger member states have a stronger say. However, it is also true that small countries greatly enhance their power in the international arena with their membership.

As is known, the enlargement policy had long been held hostage to bilateral conflicts deriving from small states such as Greece and Bulgaria. More powerful countries were evidently not engaged enough to push the policy forward. The expression “enlargement fatigue” was accordingly coined to signal declining interest in completing the process after the last accessions in 2008 and 2013, and amid other priorities in the EU and global arena.

While the large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine gave new momentum to the enlargement debate, various factors now threaten to slow it down: for instance, the continuation of the war in Ukraine, and the autocratisation of candidate countries. But a change in government in every one of the 27 member states can have a significant impact on the positions traditionally held by the countries themselves.

What is evident is that an EU paralysed by the unanimity rule in foreign policy, and easily split by external influence operations of powers interested in weakening it, cannot empower its small states as it could. Yet, paradoxically, it is precisely some of them that are most reluctant to abandon unanimity.

Indeed not all small countries have the same fear of QMV. As mentioned, each country's history strongly determines its political position.

Countries like Greece and Bulgaria that want to keep the veto power have grievances to address, and therefore do not want to dilute their veto power in cases that directly affect their security or territorial interests.

Those countries that experienced foreign domination in recent times clearly fear the loss of their newly gained sovereignty. For instance, Malta won independence from the UK very late on, and all parties there resist reforms that could diminish the country's influence in the EU, such as abandoning unanimity voting in the Council.<sup>43</sup>

Other small countries such as Finland are more self-confident and ready to discuss QMV. Another strong case is Denmark, where consensus is growing among political parties that QMV might, in selected areas, enable faster and more coordinated EU action, thereby strengthening the Union's strategic capacity.

## Concluding remarks

Despite its central position in EU geopolitical strategy, enlargement is not a political priority for the parties of any of the 27 member states. The policy is marginal in party programmes and almost absent in electoral campaigns. Moreover, what looks like a general consensus around a “merit-based enlargement” among parties conceals profound differences.

Within each European political group there are heterogeneous views over what constitutes the most important national interests, but it is among the far-right groups (ECR, PfiE, ESN) where one finds the most considerable differences – for instance, while France's RN pursues the national tradition of hostility towards enlargement, in Poland the PiS see enlargement as central to their security strategy.

As accession has become less technical and more political, who comes to power at the national level has considerable implications for the outcome of the process. If, from next year, France is governed by RN, enlargement might stall for all candidate countries, except for Serbia, which RN has identified as a politically aligned country. The opposite scenario is underway in PiS-governed Poland, where, due to geopolitical pressure from Russia, space has opened for discussion of a solution to all issues of contention with Ukraine, be them of a historical or economic nature.

The growing influence of right-wing parties in the EU means that enlargement is assessed in light of migration policies. On the one hand, there is a growing convergence among member states on encouraging the voluntary return of Ukrainian refugees; on the other hand, some countries show interest in attracting workers from the Western Balkans.

Regarding non-European migrants, the ambivalence stems from the fact that the EU demands cooperation from candidate countries in managing asylum requests, despite knowing that migrants are not interested in applying in those countries. Furthermore, once turned into host countries, the candidates risk seeing their accession process postponed indefinitely as they become a barrier to immigration.

Among the pro-enlargement political families, a significant shift in rhetoric is evident. The European People's Party (EPP) and the European Socialists (S&D) have undergone a kind of geopolitical awakening, and now describe enlargement as imperative for collective security. Nonetheless they have to address the concern raised by members of the Left and the Greens that a wider EU might erode social cohesion and democratic standards, leading to a race to the bottom in the protection of fundamental rights.

The shift from a traditional technical approach to a geopolitical logic is most visible in the Baltic and Nordic countries, and Poland. There, a robust cross-party consensus – running from the centre-left to the conservative right – frames the accession of Ukraine and Moldova as an opportunity not to be missed to push Russia eastwards, away from the national borders. Conversely, for parties in Austria, Croatia, Italy, and Slovenia, the strategic priority is seen, albeit to a lesser extent, in the Western Balkans, primarily to stem the growing influence of China and Russia there.

Despite the emphasis on geopolitics, geography does not provide a straightforward explanation for one's stance on enlargement: proximity to Russia's borders, for instance, is a relevant, but not sufficient, factor in predicting countries' or parties' positions. There are some regional perspectives that are important to consider but political concerns require a closer look in the national context.

Instead, a key predictor in the positions of European parties is their country's historical experience. This is why bilateral disputes constitute a structural obstacle to completing enlargement, and why some member states are particularly concerned with their sovereignty and others are not.

There is an economic dimension to enlargement, and some stakeholders protagonism to take into account. The analysis shows, however, that economic considerations play an uneven role in shaping political party positions on EU enlargement across member states. While in some countries these concerns are explicit and politically salient, as in the case of the agricultural sectors of Central European states, in others they are implicit, or otherwise subordinated to geopolitical priorities or rule of law conditionality.

The lack of a structured economic debate in several member states could lead to reactive or polarised discussions once concrete accession negotiations accelerate. This is particularly true for Ukraine, whose dimension and the needs arising from its future reconstruction will inevitably affect the EU single market. At the same time, EU public opinion should be mindful of the potential gains deriving from enlargement, from security to investment opportunities. All these aspects, backed by evidence, should be better addressed in EU public discussions.

Ultimately, a sustainable consensus on enlargement depends on bridging divergent perceptions of the geopolitical and socioeconomic risks involved. This is why it is important to anticipate both the benefits and downsides that enlargement may generate. National and EU-level policymakers should address these concerns, moving beyond generalised political support or hostility, and investing in impact assessments, transparent communication, and mitigation strategies, especially in sectors vulnerable to competition, such as agriculture. The current prevailing approach to enlargement, which is based on gradual integration into the EU single market, should also include measures to support candidate countries to mitigate the risk of resulting economic desertification.

As enlargement is increasingly framed as a geopolitical necessity rather than a purely technical process, the limits of unanimity in EU decision-making are more visible. The policy has long been held hostage to member states' historical legacies or issues deemed fundamental to their integrity. It is clear that unanimity undermines the EU's ability to act strategically and with credibility.

Enlargement has the potential to catalyse internal EU reforms, particularly regarding decision-making and treaty revision. However,

any credible enlargement strategy should also acknowledge that the drive for a wider Europe could undermine a deeper Union, as sovereignist political forces gain ground and influence mainstream political agendas.

The analysis shows that the debate on institutional reforms is a dividing line in discussions on EU enlargement, reflecting deeper tensions between the need for effective collective action and the protection of national interests. A political sovereignist vision for the EU does not necessarily conflict with enlargement; rather, right-wing parties and some centrist parties consider the widening of the EU to be an antidote to the deepening of political integration.

In this context, the debate on QMV – currently viewed in terms of a binary opposition between “Brussels” and national sovereignty – needs to be reframed. It should focus on how democratic sovereignty can be exercised more effectively at the European level. For many smaller or geopolitically exposed member states, veto power is perceived as an essential safeguard of national security interests and regional sensitivities.

But unanimity does not inherently guarantee sovereignty and democracy. The power that small states gain thanks to their participation in the EU vanishes in a Union paralysed by vetos. The illusion to count by exercising veto power is exposed in a global context defined by power politics, where the EU risks being reduced to a large market prey to the interests of great powers.

Enlargement is broadly supported but politically fragile, geopolitically overloaded, occasionally economically contested, and institutionally constrained. It must be reframed as a long-term strategic investment, as it could consolidate democracy in the neighbourhood

and strengthen EU geopolitical credibility, while enhancing the EU's long-term stability.

Selective extensions of QMV, the use of passerelle clauses already foreseen in the treaties, and a stronger role for both the European Parliament and national parliaments can offer concrete pathways to progress without triggering divisive debates on treaty changes in the short term. But technocratic shortcuts will only postpone problems.

A progressive reform agenda should prioritise mediation between ideological differences and conflicting geopolitical priorities, and interests' representation. Only the legal framework offered by the treaties can be a solid guide to solving such a complicated political puzzle.

### **Recommendations for a progressive EU enlargement agenda**

The proposals in this policy brief have been drawn from interviews with national experts and a number of progressive political representatives across EU member states. Strategic recommendations for progressive forces and interested organisations are included in order to help shape a coherent, values-driven approach to EU enlargement. The interviews reveal widespread political commitment to enlargement, but also underline some weaknesses and gaps in communication, institutional preparation, and political leadership that require targeted responses. Overall, enlargement is not a salient topic on international or national agendas. This is partly due to other existing priority issues, but in some cases it is down to a lack of awareness of the potential benefits and implications.

Below are some recommendations to support the enlargement process from a progressive perspective.

## **1. Bridge the gap between EU-level and national political discourse**

A recurring theme is the disconnect between EU-level and national party discourse on enlargement. Although progressive parties at the EU level support enlargement in principle, national debates often lack depth or are overshadowed by other domestic political agendas. This creates vacuums that can be exploited by far-right, Eurosceptic or anti-EU actors. Interested organisations and progressive forces should therefore:

- Facilitate dialogue among progressive parties to harmonise national and EU-level approaches, identifying shared values as well as specific challenges.
- Make EU-level debates relevant to national policy-making, pointing, for instance, to sectoral and national benefits (for example, security, markets, energy, and environmental protection).

## **2. Reframe enlargement around mutual benefits and social justice**

Progressive actors should not shy away from the risks connected with enlargement, and should consistently address concerns that the process might generate a race to the bottom in the protection of fundamental rights. Interested organisations should:

- Build a narrative of enlargement based on democratic and progressive values – for instance, anti-corruption, rule of law, workers' rights, the environmental transition, inclusive governance, democratic accountability – that highlights the tangible benefits for EU citizens (for example, job opportunities, market access, youth exchanges, economic resilience, security). At the same time, foreground the EU's global relevance.

- Directly address citizens' concerns about standards, migration, and governance, and in doing so, decouple enlargement from migration alarmism. This should be done using evidence-based information and non-polarising communication. Addressing concerns around labour shortages in member states, emphasising successful integration cases, and explaining that enlargement has no correlation with irregular migrant flows, would provide a narrative that challenges far-right actors who frame the debate around fears (migration, budget, identity threats).

### **3. Enhance political leadership and courage among progressive forces**

In some national contexts, progressive leaders remain publicly cautious on enlargement as they fear losing public support to the right. Interested organisations can play a crucial role in:

- Encouraging parties and progressive voices to initiate national debates, supporting them with evidence-based and consistent positions, framing enlargement as a project of political solidarity and long-term strategic interest.
- Build platforms for coordination across member states, facilitating transnational leadership coalitions to advocate for a progressive vision of EU expansion.

### **4. Link enlargement with internal reforms aimed at deepening the EU**

Enlargement is not only about candidate countries' compliance; it also requires EU institutional preparedness. Interested organisations can play a proactive role by:

- Promoting debates on EU reform from a social-democratic perspective, balancing democratic legitimacy, efficiency, and citizen participation.
- Enhancing the social dimension of enlargement to prevent fears of a race to the bottom.
- Advocating for institutional changes that do not delay enlargement.
- Ensuring that gradual integration does not transform into permanent stratification in the EU, but rather keeps full membership as the final objective.
- Showing how enlargement provides the opportunity to empower the EU in these troubling times, as it should go hand in hand with the extension of the QMV to new policy areas.

## 5. Activate and mobilise diaspora and transnational voices

The role of diasporas appears more significant in some countries, as electoral actors and as bridges between member states and candidate countries. Interested organisations could:

- Encourage dialogue on the political role of naturalised citizens and migrant communities.
- Support diaspora engagement strategies that link migrant experiences to EU integration narratives.

## 6. Contribute to solving bilateral disputes

As some member states are stuck in a narrow vision of what the defense of national interest means today, interested organisations could:

- Promote structured mediation mechanisms at the EU level.
- Encourage reconciliation frameworks (for example, historical commissions).
- Name and shame the partners that abuse veto for unrelated historical disputes.

## 7. Devise strategic and inclusive communication tools

Enlargement often appears disconnected from everyday concerns in many national contexts and debates. Interested organisations and progressive forces could:

- Commission public opinion research to better understand what narratives resonate with different constituencies.
- Design inclusive communication campaigns, in collaboration with trade unions, youth organisations, and civil society, to discuss the meaning and implications of enlargement, presenting specific arguments that respond to national concerns, equip progressive actors with ready-to-use communication toolkits and fact-based narratives to counter populist framings. Progressive actors should broaden and popularise the debate.

## EUROPEAN POLITICAL GROUPS

European People's Party (Christian Democrats) (EPP group)

Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)

Renew Europe (RE)

Conservatives and Reformists (ECR group)

The Left (GUE/NGL)

Patriots for Europe (PfE)

Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN)

Greens/European Free Alliance

NI (Non-Inscrits)

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## ANNA FERRO

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## ABOUT THE FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES (FEPS)

FEPS is the European progressive political foundation and the think tank of the progressive political family at EU level. Our mission is to develop innovative research, policy advice, training and debates to inspire and inform progressive politics and policies across Europe.



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## ABOUT THE KARL-RENNER-INSTITUT

The Karl-Renner-Institut is the political academy of the Austrian Social Democratic Party. It is a forum for political discourse, a centre for education and training and a think tank on the future of social democracy.



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## ABOUT OSSERVATORIO BALCANI E CAUCASO TRANSEUROPA/ CENTRO PER LA COOPERAZIONE INTERNAZIONALE

Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT) is an independent media and research center dedicated to in-depth analysis, reporting, and documentation on Southeast Europe, the Balkans, and the Caucasus. Through journalism, documentaries, and educational activities, OBCT promotes international solidarity, human rights, and peace.



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