

EU Enlargement at a Geopolitical Crossroads: Can Brussels Reconcile Values and Strategy?

The European Union is entering a new phase of enlargement, but the geopolitical environment is very different this time. The EU is no longer expanding primarily in a relatively stable post-Cold War environment. Russia's war against Ukraine, China's growing economic and political influence, uncertainty surrounding transatlantic relations, and democratic pressures within the Union itself have transformed enlargement from a primarily technical and institutional process into a strategic question.

In recent years, the EU has increasingly sought to act as a geopolitical player rather than simply as an economic bloc. The [creation](#) of the "Geopolitical Commission" in 2019 gave fresh impetus to this ambition. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine accelerated it further. Ukraine [applied](#) for EU membership on 28 February 2022, [followed](#) by Moldova and Georgia on 3 March. Ukraine and Moldova were [granted](#) candidate status in June 2022 and formally opened accession negotiations in June 2024. Georgia

[received](#) candidate status in December 2023, but its government's democratic backsliding brought the accession process to a de facto halt in 2024.

The EU now faces a difficult question: how can it respond to the geopolitical urgency of enlargement without compromising the merit-based and values-driven principles on which the accession process is built?

The answer matters not only for Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans. It also matters for the future cohesion and credibility of the European Union itself.

A Different Enlargement Environment

The European Union leadership considers its enlargement policy a vital geopolitical [investment](#) in long-term peace, security, and stability. However, the current enlargement process is unfolding in an increasingly contested geopolitical space.



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Unlike in the “big bang” enlargement of 2004, today’s EU operates in an environment where external actors actively seek political and economic influence in countries aspiring to join the Union.

Russia uses a combination of political influence, disinformation, economic leverage and, in the most extreme cases, military force. China relies more heavily on trade, investment, infrastructure and financial relationships. Other regional actors, including Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Gulf states, are also expanding their economic and political engagement.

At the same time, the EU is facing internal challenges. Populist and far-right political forces have strengthened in several member states, while democratic backsliding and disputes over the rule of law have exposed tensions within the Union itself.

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The Danger of an Enlargement Without a Clear Horizon

The EU has good reasons to maintain strict conditionality. It is not [planning](#) to cut corners or offer shortcuts to acceding countries, and it stands firm on the idea that joining the EU by 2030 is a realistic goal. The EU does not view membership simply as a geopolitical reward, as leaders of some EU candidate countries try to portray it. It means becoming part of a common legal, institutional, and political system.

Weak rule of law, corruption, ineffective institutions and democratic backsliding in a candidate country do not disappear when that country becomes a member. They can instead become problems inside the Union.

This is why the EU’s “fundamentals first” approach remains important. The rule of law, judicial independence, fundamental rights, and democratic institutions need to be addressed from the beginning of the accession process rather than postponed until the final stages.

Yet another danger exists: if accession becomes an indefinitely distant prospect, the process itself can lose credibility. The Western Balkans offer a powerful illustration. More than two decades after the EU’s Thessaloniki commitment to the region, only Croatia has joined the Union. Long negotiations, changing conditions, bilateral disputes, domestic political problems, and varying levels of political commitment have contributed to frustration on both sides. The longer the process continues without a clear sense of direction, the greater the risk that political elites and societies in candidate countries will question whether reforms are worth the political cost.

This creates a dilemma for Brussels. If it moves too slowly, it risks losing strategic influence. If it moves too quickly, it risks weakening the very conditions that make enlargement sustainable.

Georgia provides a particularly revealing example of this tension. The country applied for EU membership in March 2022, shortly after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The European Council granted Georgia candidate status in December 2023, while attaching conditions related to democratic reforms and institutional development. The decision demonstrated how difficult it is to separate geopolitical considerations from the traditional logic of conditionality. The EU had a strategic interest in keeping Georgia anchored to the European perspective, but it also faced concerns about the country’s democratic [trajectory](#). Three years after the EU’s decision, Georgia

remains an EU candidate country in [name](#) only. This is not simply a Georgian problem. It raises a broader question about the future of enlargement: can the EU remain geopolitically engaged with countries whose governments are not delivering sufficiently on democratic reforms without creating incentives for other governments to believe that geopolitical importance can compensate for poor performance?

If the answer is yes, the credibility of conditionality weakens.

Credibility and Double-Standards Problems

Credibility is one of the EU's most important assets in the enlargement process. Candidate countries need to believe that reforms will produce tangible progress. At the same time, EU member states need to believe that new members will meet the standards required for membership. Both sides can lose confidence when the process appears unpredictable. Candidate countries can become frustrated when benchmarks change or when political decisions within individual member states delay progress for reasons unrelated to their own reform performance. EU governments, meanwhile, can become reluctant to support further enlargement when reform processes appear stalled.

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The EU does not necessarily need to promise automatic accession by a specific date. But it should clarify the relationship between reforms and outcomes: what exactly is required, how progress will be measured, what happens when reforms are completed, and what consequences follow when they are not. In this regard, one should look at the idea of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen [proposing](#) roadmaps for the candidates that

have made the most progress. Without that clarity, conditionality can be perceived not as an objective framework but as a moving target.

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Another challenge to the credibility of EU conditionality is the Union's own internal democratic difficulties. The EU expects candidate countries to uphold the rule of law, judicial independence, fundamental rights and media freedom. Yet democratic backsliding within the Union itself can weaken Brussels' ability to promote these principles externally. Hungary is particularly relevant in this debate. The deterioration of democratic checks and balances within an EU member state provides political ammunition to leaders in candidate countries who face criticism over similar issues. Governments in countries such as Georgia and Serbia have at times pointed to examples within the EU when defending controversial legislation or restrictions affecting civil society and media. This does not mean the situations are identical, nor that the EU should apply the same mechanisms to member states and candidate countries. The institutional circumstances are different. But the political effect is important. The credibility of conditionality depends not only on the standards themselves but also on the perception that the EU takes its own fundamental principles seriously. A more systematic approach to monitoring democratic governance across the enlargement area could therefore strengthen the EU's position.

The Risk of a Strategic Vacuum

The EU can no longer assume that candidate countries will simply wait for accession while Brussels decides when they are ready. Countries in the EU's neighborhood have alternatives. Governments can deepen economic relations with China, maintain

political or economic ties with Russia, cooperate with Türkiye or seek investment from Gulf states and other external partners. For smaller economies in particular, these relationships can provide immediate economic benefits. The figures speak for themselves: the share of Chinese foreign direct investment in the Western Balkan region has increased significantly. In 2015, Chinese companies [accounted](#) for just 0.2% of the region's GDP. By 2024, that share had increased more than twentyfold to 4.2% of GDP, though this is overwhelmingly concentrated in Serbia, where the Chinese FDI stock reached nearly 9% of GDP in 2024; in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo it is close to zero, and in Montenegro and North Macedonia below 1%. EU investment remains far larger everywhere, from 23% of GDP in Bosnia and Herzegovina to 38% in Serbia.

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China's approach differs markedly from the EU's. While the EU generally links financial and economic support to institutional and governance reforms, Chinese engagement focuses more on economic relationships, infrastructure, investment, and trade. This can make Chinese financing attractive to governments that want rapid investment without extensive political conditions.

The EU therefore faces a strategic challenge. If its enlargement process is perceived as distant and its economic offer as slow or overly conditional, other actors can fill the space. But the solution cannot simply be to offer candidate countries faster membership in exchange for geopolitical alignment. A recent [study](#) by the European Parliament shows that, although alignment has emerged as a key indicator of the enlargement process, it lacks depth. Thus, alignment alone risks creating precisely the problem the EU should avoid: stability without sufficient democratic transformation.

The Danger of “Stabilocracy”

This is where the concept of “stabilocracy” becomes important. The term describes a situation in which external actors prioritize political stability and cooperation with governments over democratic accountability and institutional reform. For the EU, such an approach could be particularly damaging. If Brussels tolerates democratic backsliding, corruption or weak rule of law because a government is considered strategically important, it may achieve short-term geopolitical objectives while creating long-term institutional problems. The experience of enlargement demonstrates why this matters. The accession process is not simply about foreign policy. It is about transforming institutions, laws and political practices so that a candidate country can function within the EU's legal and political system. A government that is geopolitically aligned with Brussels but systematically weakens democratic institutions may therefore create a different kind of strategic risk. The EU should consequently preserve the “fundamentals first” principle. Geopolitical considerations can influence the pace, instruments and level of engagement, but they should not replace the fundamental conditions for membership.

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This does not mean that the EU should treat geopolitics as separate from the accession process. On the contrary, geopolitical resilience should become a more visible part of enlargement policy. Currently, foreign and security policy alignment is addressed primarily through Chapter 31 and the broader accession framework. But strategic dependencies can also emerge through public procurement, infrastructure, intellectual property, energy, industrial policy, and financial governance. This means that geopolitical considerations could be integrated more

systematically into existing negotiation chapters. Public procurement, for example, could pay greater attention to strategic dependencies created by major foreign-funded contracts. Industrial policy could assess excessive dependence on individual external markets. Financial governance could consider vulnerabilities created by foreign financing. Energy policy could address dependencies that have strategic as well as economic consequences. This would not require the EU to create entirely new geopolitical accession criteria. Instead, it would allow the existing accession framework to better reflect the environment in which candidate countries are operating.

Another way to strengthen the credibility of enlargement would be to make progress easier to understand and compare. The European Commission's annual enlargement reports provide detailed qualitative assessments. Such assessments are necessary because democratic governance and institutional independence cannot always be reduced to simple numbers. Nevertheless, more transparent indicators could make the process easier to follow. A numerical scoring system could complement, rather than replace, qualitative assessments. It could measure elements such as whether legislation has been adopted, whether institutions have the capacity to implement it, whether reforms are functioning in practice and whether progress has been sustained over time. A scoring system would not eliminate political judgment. On the contrary, decisions about indicators, weighting and thresholds would involve judgment. But if the methodology were publicly available, numerical indicators could make progress more comparable and reduce uncertainty about how assessments are made.

The Case for Clearer Milestones

The same principle should apply to deadlines. The EU could introduce clearer milestones for reforms without promising automatic membership on a predetermined date. A political target date

differs from a conditional milestone. A target date can create momentum, but if it is missed without consequences, it risks becoming another political slogan. A conditional milestone, by contrast, could specify which reforms must be completed by a certain point and what political or institutional consequences follow whether or not they are achieved.

This could make the accession process more predictable while preserving the principle that membership depends on performance. It would also place greater responsibility on both sides. Candidate countries would know what is expected of them, while the EU would have to demonstrate that it is prepared to respond consistently when conditions are met.

The EU Must Prepare Too

One final element is sometimes overlooked: enlargement is a two-way process. Candidate countries must prepare for membership, but the EU must also prepare to receive new members. Enlargement affects the Union's budget, institutions, decision-making procedures and internal political balance. The EU's own capacity to absorb new members therefore matters.

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The problem arises when the concept of "absorption capacity" remains too vague. If candidate countries cannot understand how and when the EU will determine whether it is ready for enlargement, the criterion can become another source of uncertainty. The EU should therefore make its own preparedness more transparent and measurable. This would strengthen the process's credibility by making clear that enlargement is not simply a test for candidate countries. It is also a test of the Union's willingness and ability to adapt.

Enlargement Without Abandoning the Fundamentals

The EU is now facing an enlargement environment in which geopolitics can no longer be separated from the accession process. Russia's war against Ukraine, China's expanding economic influence, uncertainty in transatlantic relations and political developments inside the EU have all made enlargement more strategically important. But greater geopolitical urgency does not necessarily require weaker conditionality. The more sustainable response would be to make conditionality clearer, more measurable and more predictable.

The EU should preserve the "fundamentals first" approach while providing candidate countries with clearer benchmarks, more transparent assessments and meaningful intermediate benefits. It should integrate geopolitical resilience more systematically into the accession chapters and make its own absorption capacity more transparent.

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Most importantly, Brussels should avoid the false choice between values and geopolitics. A purely normative enlargement policy risks becoming disconnected from the EU's strategic realities. A purely geopolitical enlargement policy, meanwhile, risks importing unresolved democratic and institutional weaknesses into the Union. The challenge is to build an enlargement policy that remains faithful to the principles that define the European project while responding effectively to the geopolitical environment in which the Union now operates. That is likely to be the defining test of the EU's new enlargement wave ■