



Background note: EU enlargement, internal reforms and rule of law

The interlinked questions of enlargement and internal reforms of the EU have risen to the top of the EU agenda. The unjustified Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine has underlined the geopolitical importance of enlargement of the EU. At the same time, the potential enlargement also underlines the need for internal reforms of the functioning of the EU. In an EU of potentially more than 30 member states, it is also important to consider whether the current decision-making procedures are efficient and can sustain a credible enlargement process.

Guiding questions for the session on EU enlargement, internal reforms and the rule of law:

- How does the EU best support candidate countries in their reform efforts?
- How do we ensure that the EU delivers when candidate countries deliver on their reforms and meet the objective criteria? How can we safeguard the credibility of the enlargement process?
- What internal reforms of the EU are needed for the EU to prepare itself for a potential enlargement? Is it time to abolish unanimity on the few remaining areas and how can European democracy and transparency be strengthened?
- How do we ensure the protection of the fundamental values of the EU, including after a member state has obtained membership, in an EU of 27 as well as an enlarged Union?

Enlargement

Seven enlargement rounds have taken place since the Union was first formed. After years of stagnation, the current geopolitical situation has brought back enlargement to the forefront of the Union's strategic agenda. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent applications for EU membership by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia have revived interest in bringing neighbouring countries into the bloc and revitalised the enlargement policy. In June 2022, the European Council decided to grant Ukraine and Moldova EU candidate status. At an unprecedented pace in enlargement history, the European Council opened accession negotiations in December 2023, less than two years after Ukraine's and Moldova's formal application for EU membership.



Despite the new momentum, the formal enlargement track is generally moving quite slowly. The EU has been unable to open the first negotiation cluster with Ukraine and Moldova due to the lack of agreement between the EU Member States. With a few notable exceptions, progress has stalled or slowed down in most of the Western Balkan countries. To encourage reforms and pro EU-sentiment in aspiring member countries, the EU has introduced the concept of gradual integration as part of the renewed enlargement methodology from 2020. The model involves the gradual or staged 'phasing in' of candidate countries into EU policies, programmes and so forth, which is conditional on the countries' individual reform progress. Most recently, the European Council reaffirmed its commitment to advancing gradual integration in a reversible and merit-based manner in its conclusions on Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans from 26 June 2025¹.

The European Council and the European Commission continuously confirm and reiterate that the enlargement process is merit-based, anchored in the Copenhagen criteria and depends on the objective progress made by each candidate country².

Internal reforms

While the Copenhagen criteria set out clear criteria that potential new member states must meet, it also underlines that the Union must be able to absorb these new member states.³ As stated by the European Council in its June 2024 conclusions, a process of internal EU reforms should be carried out in parallel with the ongoing enlargement process.⁴

The need for internal reforms is recognised by all EU institutions. The European Parliament has passed several resolutions calling on institutional reforms⁵, the European Commission has put forward a communication on pre-

¹ [20250626-european-council-conclusions-en.pdf](#)

² COM (2024) 690, [2022-06-2324-euco-conclusions-en.pdf](#), [20250626-european-council-conclusions-en.pdf](#)

³ https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/glossary_en

⁴ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/qa3lqlqa/euco-conclusions-27062024-en.pdf>

⁵ See 2022/2051(INL) and latest 2025/2041(INI).



enlargement reforms and policy reviews⁶ and the European Council has had preliminary discussions on the issue.

Some of the main issues discussed include:

- Decision making procedures: While the Lisbon Treaty introduced qualified majority voting and the ordinary legislative procedure to most issues, unanimity and special legislative procedures remain on some issues such as enlargement, the multiannual financial framework, taxation and the common foreign and security policy.
- The fundamental values of the EU: While the fundamental values of the EU as set out in article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty remain widely recognised and form the cornerstone of the enlargement process, the ongoing discussions concerning the situation in Hungary, in particular, is seen by some as underlining the need for more robust enforcement of the values including through article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty. However, it has proved very difficult to apply the article 7 procedure effectively.
- Democracy and transparency: The process of reforming the EU also opens the door for democratic reforms that can change the image of the EU as undemocratic and untransparent. The European Parliament's report on the institutional consequences of the EU enlargement negotiations⁷ mentions the possibility of a real right of initiative and a right of enquiry to the European Parliament. At the same time, questions remain regarding the transparency of the work in the Council of the European Union and the European Commission. Furthermore, the possibility of a right of initiative (green card) to member state parliaments remains underdeveloped.

⁶ COM (2024) 146.

⁷ 2025/2041(INI) adopted on 22 October 2025.