

Florent Marciacq* - 4 April 2025

Pragmatic, Gradual, Geopolitical...

What's Left of the Ambitions of the European Union's Enlargement?

The enlargement process of the European Union (EU) has long been regarded as “one of its most successful foreign policy tools”¹ and it is now presented in Brussels as a “geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability, and prosperity”.² Its proponents include leaders as diverse as Pedro Sánchez (S&D)³, Emmanuel Macron (Renew)⁴, Viktor Orbán (P/E)⁵, Giorgia Meloni (ECR)⁶, and Donald Tusk (EPP)⁷, all calling for the Union to expand and accelerate the process. Their shared endorsement might suggest that EU enlargement enjoys a meaningful consensus in the Council. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Enlargement is Running Out of Steam in the Western Balkans

The EU's decision to grant Ukraine and Moldova candidate status in June 2023 was a striking signal of renewed commitment to enlargement. Yet in the Western Balkans, the process has been marred by contradictions.⁸ In Serbia, over a decade of accession efforts has failed to strengthen democracy. Rather it has enabled Aleksandar Vučić's authoritarianism, with the EU appearing complicit. This perception deepens as mass protests continue annually.⁹ Under Vučić's rule and the EU's guidance, Serbia has become a model of autocratic consolidation—suppressing media, intimidating opponents, capturing institutions, politicising administration, enabling electoral fraud, fostering mafia networks, spreading nationalist revisionism, and cooperating with Moscow and Beijing outside democratic oversight.¹⁰

Despite this record, Serbia has continued, albeit slowly, to progress toward EU accession. The President of the European Commission recently praised Vučić's “exceptional work and excellent reform programme”¹¹, advocating for the opening of a new negotiation cluster¹², while the new Enlargement Commissioner, Marta Kos, gave assurances that all democratic deficiencies would be addressed later within the European agenda. This misplaced confidence is paradoxical. Should the supposedly merit-based process of EU ac-

cession not separate the wheat from the chaff? Why has the EU not sanctioned Vučić's regime accordingly?

Similar contradictions persist in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the EU has failed to support the Federation's sovereignty. It has allowed Croatian interference and failed to counter Serbian separatism and mafia influence in Republika Srpska¹³. In February 2025, Republika Srpska's President Milorad Dodik was convicted for attempting to strip the Constitutional Court's authority. His secessionist rhetoric, revisionism, and ties to Vučić and Putin threaten Bosnia's unity. Yet, due to Viktor Orbán's support for Dodik, the EU has taken no decisive action.¹⁴ Instead, it granted candidate status in December 2022, despite minimal progress.

North Macedonia's EU path was also derailed by the Union's wavering. After rejecting authoritarianism and changing its name in 2018 under Greek pressure, the country expected progress. Instead, Bulgaria demanded constitutional reforms on identity issues without guarantees of lifting its veto.¹⁵ The EU legitimised this blackmail by embedding it in the negotiation framework—fueling feelings of contempt from Belgrade to Moscow about the EU's reliability. Why should candidates compromise if the EU doesn't keep its word?

In Kosovo, the process of EU accession and dialogue with Belgrade, facilitated by the EU, is currently hindering the consolidation of the state's sovereignty by conditioning the young country's European trajectory on the implementation of an agreement designed to satisfy its Serbian neighbour, which remains fiercely opposed to its very international existence. This agreement, in return, does not include any provision for Kosovo's recognition—an issue further complicated by the opposition of five EU member states (Cyprus, Spain, Greece, Romania, and Slovakia)¹⁶. This creates a nearly unsolvable equation: if Kosovo wishes to progress toward EU membership, it must meet the specific demands of third parties that refuse to acknowledge its international existence. Its pro-

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gress in democratic governance in recent years and pro-European orientation, in one word, its merit, hold little weight compared to Serbia and other non-recognisers' influence and veto power on the process¹⁷.

To inspire hope, the Commission points to Montenegro and Albania as top accession candidates—by 2030. Yet this depends on treaty ratifications, including a referendum in France, where only 37% supported enlargement in 2024.¹⁸ Add opposition in the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and others, and the path ahead is far from smooth.

Gradual Integration: The New Totem of Enlargement

The new panacea promoted in Brussels and European capitals is gradual integration—a pragmatic approach offering concrete benefits to aspiring members as they progress toward membership. These benefits aim to reinforce their European alignment, support economic convergence with the EU, ease public frustration in candidate countries, and respond to European scepticism about rapid enlargement. The proposals revolve around several key ideas¹⁹, including early access to European cohesion funds²⁰, phased entry into the European single market (requiring gradual alignment with EU regulations), progressive participation in EU sectoral policies, programmes, and agencies, as well as observer status in certain EU institutions. Some proposals suggest granting an intermediate status of “associated state” before full membership is achieved²¹.

Such proposals, aimed at softening the binary nature of the enlargement process, are increasingly prominent within European institutions. In December of last year, Ursula von der Leyen emphasised the importance of access to the European single market as a major opportunity for Balkan economies and urged the countries in the region to advance in establishing a common regional market²². Her message aligns with that of the German Chancellery, which now prioritises regional economic cooperation in the Western Balkans—particularly through the Berlin Process – at the expense of democratic and reconciliation efforts. This pragmatic approach has also gained traction in France²³, Sweden²⁴, Lithuania²⁵, Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Italy, Slovakia, Slovenia²⁶, Serbia²⁷, Albania²⁸, etc. A consensus appears to be forming around the idea that the future of

EU enlargement lies in the gradual integration of prospective member states.

These proposals focusing on economic integration have, undoubtedly, the merit of offering tangible advantages to the citizens of candidate countries and revitalising the enlargement process. In 2023, for example, the European Commission introduced a new Growth Plan, allocating €6 billion for 2024-2027 to support the partial integration of Western Balkan countries into the single market²⁹. The ambition of the European Commission President, with this Growth Plan alone, is to double the size of the economies in the region³⁰. By fostering this economic convergence, the EU hopes to facilitate their gradual integration into the single market and, ultimately, full membership³¹.

These proposals cement the primacy of economic integration over the broader enlargement process, relegating issues of democracy, reconciliation, and contested sovereignty to the sidelines. While the current proposals claim to reinforce conditionality—tying access to EU funds to progress on fundamental issues such as the rule of law—in practice, the EU's past failures raise doubts about its ability to enforce these conditions effectively. The EU already possesses instruments to sanction regimes like that of Aleksandar Vučić, yet it has refrained from using them and has largely remained silent on democratic backsliding in the region. Worse still, it is increasingly accepting the idea that economic cooperation can flourish alongside autocratic governance. In 2023, for instance, Serbia received the largest-ever EU grant for a regional country – €600 million for a railway between Belgrade and Niš – despite its alarming democratic record and in direct contradiction to the EU's merit-based approach³². By prioritising economic considerations, these proposals tend to reduce the European project to a legal order and a market and instil in candidate countries a transactional approach to integration. This instrumentalist logic, embedded in the gradual integration model, is one in which neither democracy nor the Union itself will emerge strengthened.

A Pipe Dream in the East?

While gradual integration is presented as a novelty in the Western Balkans, it is nothing new in the East. The Versailles Summit, held in March 2022, marked a shift in the EU's approach to three of its Eastern partners – Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia (the so-called Trio). Their relationship to the EU, before that, had

been governed by the Neighbourhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership framework (since 2009), and on the strategic level, by the idea of “integration without membership”³³. The three countries had, however, been pleading for years for accession perspectives³⁴. But they had instead been offered an alternative path of *gradual* integration.

The association agreements they concluded in the mid 2010s established a deep and comprehensive free trade area (DCFTA) allowing Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to access particular segments of the EU’s Single Market, while bolstering their regulatory alignment with the EU’s *acquis*. This allowed the three countries to progress even further than candidate countries from the Western Balkans³⁵. Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia were also included, for instance, in the EU’s Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) and benefitted from visa liberalisation from 2014 (Moldova) and 2017 (Ukraine, Georgia).

The EU’s gradual integration approach towards the Trio, however, has always lacked conflict-sensitivity. It has engaged with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia as if the three countries had not been facing major security challenges. This has hardly changed after 2022, despite the Council’s decision to grant the three countries candidate status. While the EU did turn its association agreements with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia into pre-accession instruments³⁶, it has hitherto refrained from clarifying what enlargement would mean for countries unable to affirm their territorial sovereignty, and what role the EU should play in addressing those hard security issues in prospective member states.

These concerns cannot be neglected as they can disrupt all transformation processes and dramatically affect the countries’ European trajectory. This has been the case with Georgia, declared EU candidate in December 2023. Fraught with regional security concerns, its European path took a worrisome turn in 2024 when the Georgian Dream party, backed by electoral irregularities and support from Russia, secured victory in the parliamentary elections. Georgia has since then been sliding away from the EU, despite massive protests. In such geopolitical contexts, the prospect of perhaps, in a distant future, joining the EU, holds little weight against immediate security calculations that dominate political life.

Gradual integration does not offer a predictable course for EU accession. It instead leaves sensitive

questions open and reinforces existing vulnerabilities which rival powers seek to exploit. With Russia, China, and even the United States under Donald Trump actively working to undermine democratic stability, these proposals offer only a fragile anchor for the candidate countries.

Enlargement in the Midst of Ideological and Geopolitical Turmoil

The geopolitical challenges posed by Russia³⁷, China³⁸, and other rival powers of the European Union in the Western Balkans and in the East are well known. They enable leaders to consolidate personal power, which would otherwise be constrained by democratic reforms, and offer alternatives that limit the EU’s influence. Beyond the challenge posed by these “external powers”³⁹, a new threat now arises from the new US administration. Since Donald Trump took office, Washington has become a new vector of instability and uncertainty. The rapprochement with Moscow, taking place without European involvement, may signal a deeply concerning shift in alliances. For Ukraine and Moldova, the stakes are existential, as Russia looms over more territory. For the EU, it is about the very architecture of European security, along with European foreign policy ambitions. The EU’s credibility now hinges on its ability to defend Ukraine’s sovereignty as a future member state. Failure on this front, particularly if accelerated by the emergence of a new Russo-American Entente, would have dramatic consequences in the Western Balkans and beyond.

One of the key risks linked to this fracture in the Western alliance is the sudden, unilateral, and uncoordinated withdrawal of American military forces from European theatres, particularly in Romania and in Kosovo⁴⁰. These troops play a critical deterrent role in maintaining regional stability in the Black Sea and the Western Balkans. Such a sudden and uncoordinated withdrawal would be a boon for those who seek to exploit renewed instability in the Western Balkans, in Moldova and elsewhere in Ukraine. A rapid deterioration in regional security, or even an escalation triggered by local agitators or orchestrated from afar, would have a domino effect, leaving the EU extremely vulnerable.

This risk is heightened by Donald Trump’s disregard for international rules and his transactional approach, which prioritises power dynamics. In recent

weeks, the US administration has not only aligned itself more closely with the Kremlin on Ukraine and NATO but has also strengthened ties with Aleksandar Vučić's regime in Serbia. After Ukraine, the U.S. could be tempted to impose a "deal" on Pristina, forcing it to relinquish northern Kosovo to Serbia -without involving the EU in the negotiations. The geopolitical and ethno-territorial implications of such a deal would plunge the Western Balkans into turmoil and open a new instability front in Europe.⁴¹ It would violate international law and effectively nullify the EU's influence in the region.

Donald Trump's disregard for the EU and international law is a godsend for those who have long sought to hollow out the European project. This includes Viktor Orbán's Hungary, which has forged strong political, economic, and personal ties with Aleksandar Vučić's Serbia and Milorad Dodik's Republika Srpska⁴². Orbán has advocated an accelerated enlargement process for over a decade. Other far-right parties, from Germany's AfD to France's Rassemblement National (RN), which oppose EU enlargement, are capitalising on the Trump administration's attacks against the EU—both in Europe and on the Ukrainian front - as well as against democracy itself. A failure by the EU on any of these fronts would open a gaping hole into which European aspirations for political integration and enlargement could collapse entirely.

Clear Objectives, Clear Priorities, Clear Alliances

From Belgrade to Washington, via Moscow and Budapest, a destructive convergence is working to undermine the European project. This movement finds allies across Europe, particularly among far-right factions in Germany, France, Italy, and beyond. Upcoming elections in Romania, Czechia, and Poland could further strengthen this trend. An illiberal front is forming, ready to challenge democracy and the EU's foundational principles.

Defending the European project requires concrete engagement wherever fractures emerge. Militarily, this means deploying European forces as needed to deter destabilising rivals. Such deployments do not require full EU consensus and can be led by individual member states. Efforts to do so must be amplified. Politically, it demands clarity and bold choices. The debate must move beyond superficial consensus around "enlargement." Today, being "for or against"

enlargement is almost meaningless, with populists, bureaucrats, and pro-Europeans alike claiming to support it. The real question is: *what kind of enlargement for what kind of Europe?*

A progressive vision must place constitutional democracy at the core of European integration. The Union should be a community of values, not just a market or geopolitical actor. This means upholding democratic standards without compromise—both within the EU (e.g., against Hungary) and among candidates (e.g., Serbia). Responsibility lies with national capitals to lead by example and steer the political debate. A Union that cannot uphold its principles internally cannot credibly defend them globally. Progressive governments must identify true allies—whether member states or candidates—and deepen integration with them. This means advancing toward a tighter, federal political union with a Constitution safeguarding democracy. This will not achieve unanimous support, but it can define a constructive political divide. The goal is not to impose a single vision but to form a democratic core, open to any state that shares its values. By this measure, Ukraine belongs in that core more than Orbán's Hungary or Fico's Slovakia.

This foundational approach will help clarify the ultimate goal of the European project⁴³. The European Political Community, in its original conception, could have contributed to this objective had it not subordinated the idea of European democracy to short-term geopolitical interests⁴⁴. It is not too late. The next EPC summits could refocus on a small group of countries that share the same vision of democracy in Europe⁴⁵. Rather than inviting a pot-pourri of European states that provides a platform to autocrats of all kinds, the EPC would then take on a major challenge: setting a clear direction for the European project and structuring the defence of the continent around the fundamental question of values.

Calling for a turning point in EU enlargement policy has become a cliché. While reforming the enlargement process is certainly necessary, the deeper issue lies elsewhere. It rests in the hands of those across Europe who are committed to defending a vision of Europe and democracy that is now under threat. Enlargement must return to its original purpose. Before being a technical process, it must once again become a call "upon the other peoples of Europe who share [our] ideal to join in [our] efforts"⁴⁶.

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