



Report on EU's enlargement & neighbourhood policy toolbox

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Executive Summary

The report critically examines the European Union's (EU) enlargement and neighbourhood policy, focusing on its existing tools, objectives, and necessary reforms. The analysis aims to inform future policy development to enhance the EU's resilience, particularly in light of evolving geopolitical contexts and the ongoing integration challenges within the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans. The report divides the evolution of the EU enlargement policy into three phases: the "big bang" enlargement of 1990-2004, protracted enlargement of 2005-2021, and geopolitical enlargement since 2022. It has been found that different sets of factors have determined the variation of the EU strategy for enlargement across the timeframe. These factors include the domestic EU context, the progress of transformation in aspirant countries, and geopolitical considerations. Although the policy of conditionality has had profound positive effects on democratization and economic liberalization of Central and Eastern European countries, it has also been associated with undesirable effects. Surveying these effects on the political and economic transformation of the EU aspirant countries reveals areas for improvement for the future of the EU enlargement strategy. Finally, the report recommends strengthening conditionality mechanisms, enhancing civil society engagement, addressing regional disparities, promoting public engagement and adopting a differentiated integration model, to invigorate the EU enlargement strategy and help build a united and prosperous Europe.

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About InvigoratEU

InvigoratEU is a Horizon Europe-funded project, coordinated by the EU-Chair at the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) together with the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) in Berlin. The project, with a duration of 3 years from January 2024 until December 2026, examines how the EU can structure its future relations with its Eastern neighbours and the countries of the Western Balkans. The consortium has received around three million euros for this endeavour.

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1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) enlargement policy has been a pivotal aspect of its external relations, shaping the political and socio-economic landscape of Europe, especially since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the beginning of the 1990s. On the one hand, the EU aimed at stable and peaceful borders by transforming its neighbourhood, while, on the other hand, the new independent states aspired to a prosperous life within the Union. Consequently, unlike the previous rounds of enlargement that were relatively smooth and uncontroversial, the accession of former communist countries posed different kinds of challenges to the EU. In response to these post-Cold War geopolitical changes in Europe, particularly the democratisation of Central and Eastern European countries, the EU formulated at the European Council meeting in Copenhagen 1993 criteria for accession – the so-called Copenhagen Criteria. As these nations transitioned from authoritarian regimes to democracies, the EU sought to provide a framework for their integration into the European Union, ensuring that new members would uphold the Union's core values and be capable of participating effectively in its market and political systems (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004).

The Copenhagen Criteria outlined the fundamental conditions for EU membership. These criteria include stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union; and the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of the political, economic and monetary union (European Council 1993). Since their introduction, the EU has seen several rounds of enlargement, each influenced by various factors connected to the international context, internal affairs of the EU and domestic politics of the aspirant countries.

This report aims to evaluate the EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy since the introduction of the Copenhagen Criteria. For this purpose, we rely on the existing literature and analyse EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy in two ways. On the one hand, we treat the enlargement policy as a dependent variable and answer the question: what explains the variation in terms of EU enlargement strategy? On the other hand, we treat the EU enlargement policy as an independent variable and answer the question: what are the effects of EU enlargement policy for the candidate countries, wider neighbourhood and potentially for the EU?

The first question is essentially a survey of the history of enlargement over the last three decades and explores the literature to reveal what it can tell us about the changing nature of the enlargement strategy. We will particularly look into the factors that are related to (1) the domestic situation within the EU, (2) the domestic situation within the EU aspirant countries, and (3) geopolitical considerations. It has already been observed that there can be three main phases of EU enlargement, for example, Schimmelfennig (2024) distinguishes three approaches to EU enlargement: transformative, politicized, and geopoliticized, which mark the three different phases. This report follows Schimmelfennig's (2024) temporal criteria and

identifies the following three phases, which correspond to varied constellations of the above-mentioned three sets of factors:

- 1) 1990-2004: Big Bang enlargement;
- 2) 2005-2021: protracted enlargement;
- 3) 2022 onwards: geopolitical enlargement.

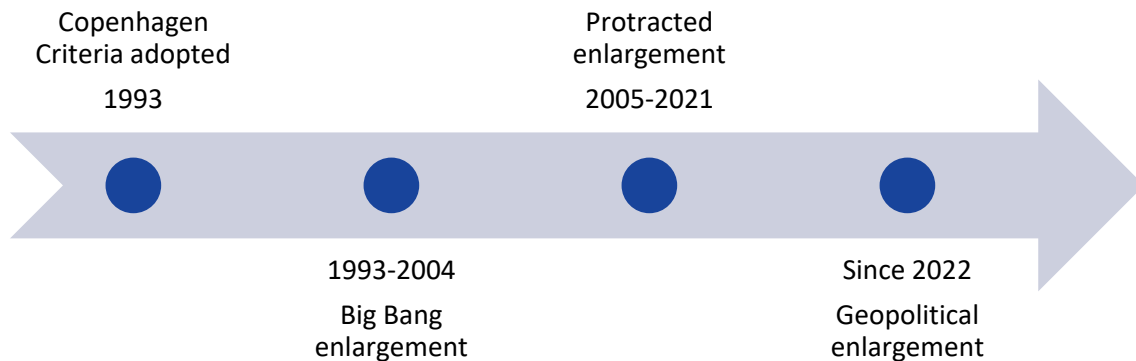
The second question is concerned with what the EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy has achieved and where it has failed. The effects of the EU political agenda are divided into two categories: political transformation and economic transformation of aspirant countries. The former focuses on the effectiveness and sustainability of the reforms aiming at democratic consolidation and hindering political competition and accountability within aspirant countries. The latter identifies persisting regional disparities within and across countries, especially the East-West divide driven by a dependent growth model.

Overall, the determinants and effects of the EU enlargement strategy are closely intertwined with each other. The report first presents the waves of enlargement since the introduction of the Copenhagen Criteria, followed by the analysis of the determinants of variance in the EU enlargement strategy. Then, the effects of the EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy on the candidate countries are explored, identifying areas for improvement.

2. The Three Phases of the EU Enlargement Since the Copenhagen Criteria

The EU enlargement after the Copenhagen Criteria can be divided into three phases. The first phase lasted until 2004, following which the second phase covered the 2005-2021 period, while the third and current phase started in 2022 after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia (Schimmelfennig 2024). These phases are characterized by different sets of conditions determining the process and outcome of enlargement. The first phase witnessed high progress, followed by a low-intensity second phase, while the third phase returned to high progress again (see Schimmelfennig 2024). However, we are yet to see a new member of the EU in the current phase, as candidates from Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, as well as Turkey, remain outside the EU.

Figure 1. Timeline of the EU enlargement since the introduction of the Copenhagen Criteria.



2.1. The First Phase: The “Big Bang” Enlargement

The initial phase of enlargement subjected to the Copenhagen Criteria saw the accession of Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995. This was a relatively smooth process given these countries' advanced economic and political systems (Moravcsik 1998). However, the focus soon shifted to the more challenging task of integrating Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. The most substantial enlargement, the largest in EU history, occurred in 2004 when ten new, predominantly CEE countries joined the EU: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. This expansion, often referred to as the "big bang" enlargement, was a major milestone in European integration, marking the reunification of Eastern and Western Europe after the Cold War.

The 2004 enlargement, driven by the desire to stabilise and democratise the former Eastern Bloc countries and integrate them into the European market economy (Vachudova 2005), was underpinned by significant preparatory work, including the Europe Agreements signed in the early 1990s, which provided a framework for political and economic cooperation and set the phase for full membership. The accession process involved rigorous scrutiny of the candidate countries' adherence to the Copenhagen Criteria, necessitating substantial reforms in governance, judiciary and economic structures (Grabbe 2006).

Unlike the CEE countries, however, Turkey applied for membership in 1987, even before the Copenhagen Criteria were introduced, and was granted candidate status in 1999, i.e. during the fast-paced first phase of enlargement (see Tekin 2021). Nevertheless, Turkey's EU membership bid has been one of the most contentious and prolonged in the history of EU enlargement. Negotiations have stalled due to various political and cultural issues, including human rights concerns, democratic backsliding and the complex geopolitical situation involving Cyprus (Müftüler-Baç 2008). The EU's relationship with Turkey is further complicated by concerns over the country's size and the potential impact on the Union's decision-making processes and budget. Additionally, cultural and religious differences have played a

role in the hesitancy of some EU member states to support Turkey's accession. Despite these challenges, Turkey remains an important strategic partner for the EU, particularly in areas such as trade and migration (Schimmelfennig 2009).

The first phase was characterised by the most suitable international context for EU enlargement compared to the other two phases as the main ideological rival of the West, the Soviet Union, collapsed. This was coupled with pro-enlargement attitudes within the EU public and political elite and democratisation within the candidate countries (see Schimmelfennig 2024). Therefore, the enlargement was fast even if not always the smoothest.

2.2. The Second Phase: The Protracted Enlargement

Following the 2004 wave, Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007. Their accession was part of the same enlargement framework but was delayed due to concerns about their readiness, particularly regarding corruption and judicial independence. The European Commission implemented strict monitoring mechanisms to ensure these countries continued to reform post-accession, highlighting the challenges of integrating countries with significant governance issues (Levitz and Pop-Eleches 2010). However, the successful accession of the two countries underlines the transformative impact of the EU's conditionality, driving substantial political and economic reforms (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005b).

Since 2007, the EU's enlargement strategy has faced new challenges and developments. The accession of Croatia in 2013 marked the first enlargement after the global financial crisis, reflecting the EU's cautious approach in the aftermath. The ongoing negotiations with Western Balkan countries and Turkey demonstrate the complexity of the environment during the second phase of enlargement. This was influenced by factors such as economic stability, regional conflicts and the rise of Euroscepticism (Epstein and Jacoby 2014). Croatia's journey to EU membership was characterised by extensive reforms and a prolonged negotiation process. Croatia applied for EU membership in 2003, and its path was complicated by issues related to war crimes from the Yugoslav Wars and cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The EU's insistence on cooperation with ICTY as a precondition for membership underscored the Union's commitment to justice and human rights (Noutcheva 2009).

The Western Balkans region, including countries such as Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, received their candidate status during the second phase of EU enlargement, but the progress has been rather slow. The accession process for these countries has been fraught with challenges, including political instability, corruption and issues related to ethnic tensions. The EU has maintained a stringent approach, emphasising the need for comprehensive reforms and adherence to the Copenhagen Criteria, and according to Schwarz (2016), political transformation emerged as a necessary but insufficient condition for successful membership among South-East European countries. This cautious stance reflects lessons learned from previous enlargements, particularly the need to ensure that

new members are fully prepared to integrate into the EU framework (Anastasakis 2008). The Western Balkans continue to be a focal point for future EU enlargement. The EU's engagement with these countries is driven by the desire to promote stability and economic development in a region historically plagued by conflict and political instability (Anghel and Džankić 2023; Elbasani 2013).

With Russia's re-gaining influence in the shared neighbourhood since the early 2000s. Consequently, bilateral relations between Russia and the EU during the second phase of enlargement became increasingly tense. Furthermore, the domestic context within the EU constrained the fast enlargement as the EU needed to fully process the "big bang" enlargement. At the same time, the processes of democratisation started stagnating in the candidate countries, which further delayed the progress (see Schimmelfennig 2024).

2.3. The Third Phase: Geopolitical Enlargement

The third phase of enlargement started in 2022 almost ten years since Croatia became the last new member of the EU. The new phase was triggered by the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine, following which Ukraine, along with Moldova and Georgia, quickly applied for EU membership. Considering how quickly the EU moved to grant the associated trio and Bosnia and Herzegovina a candidate status, it is possible to speak of a geopolitical enlargement. According to Schimmelfennig (2023), the year 2022 was truly exceptional in terms of the amount of formal enlargement activities, which has not happened since the first phase of Eastern enlargement. Indeed, within two years of the start of this phase, four countries received candidate status. However, neither the democratisation process nor the EU's constraining domestic situation has changed quickly since the invasion of Ukraine (Schimmelfennig 2024). Therefore, it is yet to be seen how this process develops because the current situation is somewhat paradoxical.

On the one hand, to respond to the war in Ukraine, the EU needs to move the accession process quickly, which it has been doing until now, as the accession negotiations are to be opened in 2024. According to Yakymenko and Pashkov (2023), the EU has fundamentally changed its philosophy for further enlargement. On the other hand, however, what the EU has learned from the previous enlargement rounds, is that it is important that the candidate countries, as well as the EU itself, are prepared politically and economically. Yet, this sort of conditionality, Schimmelfennig (2024) argues, is going to delay the whole process. This risks stalling the enlargement just like in the previous phase. Therefore, the EU faces a trade-off in the third phase of enlargement, and it is necessary to resolve this trade-off if the EU is to emerge as a significant geopolitical actor.

Overall, the history of EU enlargement since the introduction of the Copenhagen Criteria highlights the complexities and challenges of integrating new members into the Union. Each phase of enlargement has brought its own set of issues, from governance and corruption to geopolitical considerations. The EU's commitment to upholding democratic values, human rights and the rule of law has been a consistent

theme throughout the enlargement process. As the EU continues to engage with candidate countries, particularly in the Western Balkans, the lessons learned from past enlargements will be crucial in shaping future policies. The enlargement process remains a powerful tool for promoting stability, democracy and economic development in Europe, reflecting the Union's broader goals of fostering a united and prosperous continent. However, not all lessons may be useful in the context of Eastern neighbours due to the unique geopolitical challenges.

3. Determinants of the EU Enlargement Strategy

The three phases of the EU enlargement strategy show important variation, which can be explained with three main sets of factors: the EU's domestic context, the progress of the aspirant countries and geopolitical considerations. The enlargement process is swift when the domestic context in the EU is permissive in terms of normative dimension, integration capacity and public opinion. Additionally, when aspirant countries demonstrate progress in democratisation and economic liberalisation, the EU rewards them with increased integration and eventual membership. Finally, when there are geopolitical considerations such as the stabilisation of EU borders or responding to an external threat, enlargement has progressed faster.

3.1. Domestic Context in the EU

Three main factors determine whether the domestic situation within the EU is permissive or constraining when it comes to enlargement: normative dimension, integration capacity and public opinion. Considering that since the introduction of the Copenhagen Criteria, the primary mechanism for the EU to transform its neighbourhood has been the policy of conditionality, the EU became a "liberal community" (Schimmelfennig 2005a) and through a "rhetorical action" found itself in a "trap" (Schimmelfennig 2005b). Furthermore, Sedelmeier (2005) argues that the EU's collective identity centred around the notion of responsibility towards the CEE countries has played a crucial role for member states to depart from pure self-interested behaviour and accommodate CEE countries and their interests in the EU policies. Although it has been argued by the proponents of the rationalist approach (see Moravcsik and Vachudova 2005; Vachudova 2014) that in the context of the "big bang" enlargement, member states acted in self-interest defined by economic and geopolitical considerations, Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005b) show that shaming reluctant member states and instrumentalising normative institutions is what increased the bargaining power of CEE countries in the accession negotiations. Consequently, the normative dimension outweighed the rational considerations of member states.

While the rhetorical action and community trap were highly important during the first phase of enlargement, it faded in comparison during the second phase of enlargement. However, we are witnessing the re-emergence of the normative dimension and collective European identity since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As a result, the slow progress during the second phase of enlargement can be attributed at least partly to these arguments.

Another important factor is the integration capacity of the EU that can either permit enlargement or constrain the process. Integration capacity can have two dimensions: external – to prepare third countries for membership, and internal – to remain a cohesive and functioning Union after enlargement (Börzel, Dimitrova and Schimmelfennig 2017). Although Börzel, Dimitrova and Schimmelfennig (2017) find that the EU's integration capacity is generally high, the external dimension is negatively impacted by the absence of a membership perspective, while the internal integration capacity is constrained by sceptical publics. These findings strengthen the previous arguments that even against the background of the talks of “enlargement fatigue” following the “big bang” enlargement, the external incentives model for transforming the EU neighbourhood remains highly relevant (Schimmelfennig 2008; see also Buscaneanu and Li 2024; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; 2020). On the other hand, however, it is crucial that the conditionality policy remains credible by focusing on the outcome and not only the “journey”; clear by avoiding the mixture of normative, functional and geopolitical conditions; and consistent by maintaining the same level of rigour with all countries in order to remain effective (see Anastasakis 2008). In a similar line, the EU has been criticised for its involvement with Eastern and Southern neighbours – countries which do not benefit from highly legalised rule transfer (Lavenex 2011).

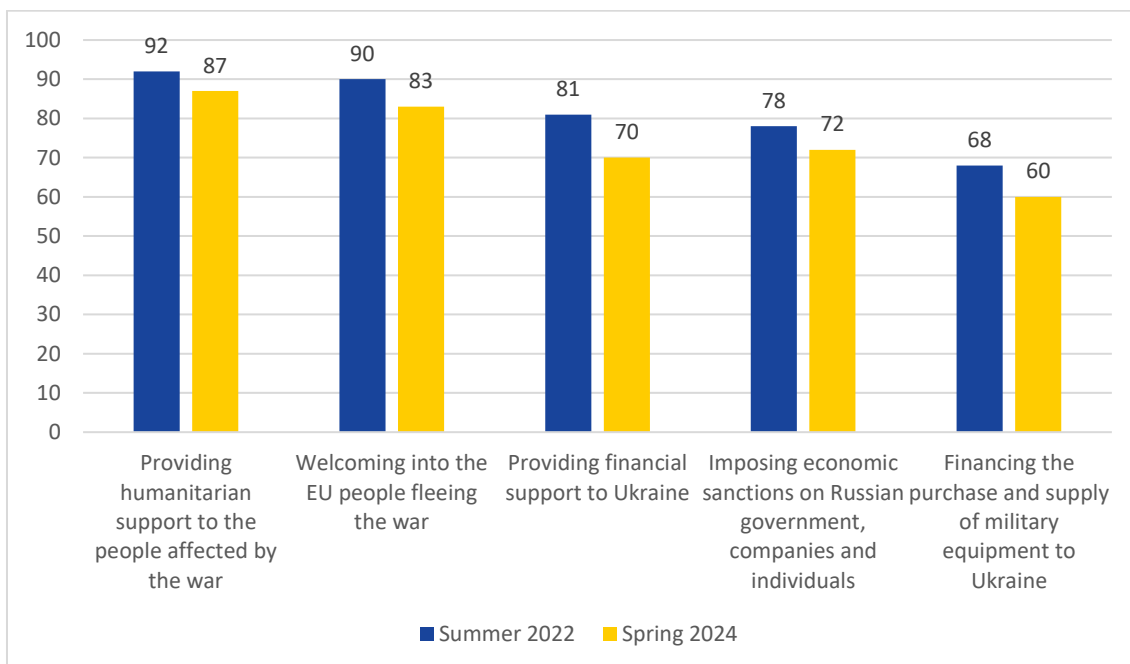
Although the research shows that integration capacity has remained high at times, it may be constrained by various factors. During the second phase, the enlargement fatigue was present in the public discourse (see Szolucha 2010), and the absence of actors who could instrumentalise normative institutions to change the mood further slowed down the progress of enlargement. However, this may be changing during the third phase of enlargement.

Although integration capacity is affected by public opinion, the latter still deserves to be treated as a separate factor determining what the EU does in relation to its neighbours. Public opinion can indirectly impact the pace and direction of enlargement and directly influence enlargement through referenda on accession. In existing member states, public scepticism towards enlargement, driven by concerns over immigration, economic competition and cultural integration, can lead to political resistance and slow down the enlargement process (Jones and van der Bijl 2004; Hooghe and Marks 2009). According to Dimitrova and Kortenska (2017), engaging with the domestic public within the EU, along with promoting better governance in candidate countries, is the key to increasing the integration capacity of the EU. Furthermore, Maier and Rittberger (2008) argue that public opinion is determined by media exposure. Particularly, media shapes the standards by which the public evaluates the fit of candidate countries for membership. If the public perceives that a candidate country performs well economically, has a sufficient level of democracy and is a cultural match with the EU, then the support for enlargement will be high (Maier and Rittberger 2008). More recently, Blok et al. (2024) have studied public support for variations of decision-making arrangements for differentiated integration. The authors found that although public opinion is contingent on the pre-existing pro- and anti-European attitudes, inclusiveness and a

limited number of veto points were two aspects of institutional arrangement that citizens cared about the most (Blok et al. 2024).

During the third phase of enlargement, public opinion was highly supportive towards Ukraine in its war against Russia, albeit showing a downward trend across the EU (see Figure 2). The recent increasing trends of Euroscepticism in the European political landscape, however, may have detrimental effects on the support of enlargement (Belanger and Schimmelfennig 2021; on the increasing importance of public preferences and party positions in the EU, see also Hooghe and Marks 2009). This trend is demonstrated in the increasing success of right-wing populist parties with Eurosceptic positions in the elections at both national and European level (see Hix, Whitaker and Zapryanova 2024). Therefore, the EU and individual member states may need to intensify their engagement with citizens to counterbalance this negative influence for the prospects of future enlargement.

Figure 2. Approval of EU responses against the Russian war in Ukraine (EU27)



Source: Compiled from European Commission's (2022; 2024) standard Eurobarometer surveys.

To sum up, three factors characteristic of the EU domestic context are important determinants of the enlargement progress. Firstly, the normative dimension and instrumentalisation of the normative institutions can ensure the success of enlargement. Secondly, the EU's internal and external capacity to integrate can be the key for the pace of enlargement progress. Finally, public opinion may permit or constrain the enlargement. However, the progress of the enlargement process does not only depend on the EU, and the second set of factors relate to the domestic context of the aspirant countries.

3.2. Progress of Transformation in Aspirant Countries

Without meeting the conditions, it is virtually impossible for aspirant countries to become EU members. Therefore, the extent to which these countries progress on their path to democratisation and institution-building, as well as economic liberalisation, corresponds to the rewards received through the EU conditionality policy. As shown above, the external incentives model remains highly relevant even after the “big bang” enlargement. However, meeting these conditions does not come without its costs.

Political stability and the quality of governance in candidate countries are critical determinants of their EU membership prospects. The EU's emphasis on the rule of law, democratic institutions and human rights requires candidate countries to undertake extensive political reforms. Countries with robust democratic institutions and governance frameworks are better positioned to meet these criteria and progress in their accession negotiations (Epstein and Jacoby 2014; Dimitrova and Kortenska 2017). Vachudova (2015) argues that this sort of external governance is what sets the post-communist transformation apart from other waves of democratisation and introduces the EU as an external driver of democratisation. However, these reforms come with costs for governments that moderate the effects of conditionality and by definition influence the outcome of enlargement. Buscaneanu and Li (2024), studying Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, show that higher costs of reforms have a negative effect on democratisation, while a positive cost-benefit balance contributes to it. Similarly, Richter and Wunsch (2020) argue that the effectiveness of political conditionality varies across countries influenced by domestic political dynamics and the strength of civil society (see also Avdeyeva 2009; Elbasani and Šabić 2018; Grabbe 2001; O'Dwyer 2006). In its own turn, however, civil society is often weak and public engagement is not welcomed in former communist countries, which contributed to a double weakness of these countries preventing cooperation between the government and civil society during the accession period (Börzel and Buzogany 2010). Yet during the “big bang” enlargement, transnational networks of civil society and diffusion of pro-democracy mobilization helped empower non-state actors (Noutcheva 2016; Parau 2009), but this empowerment was contingent on the willingness and capacity of civil society organisations to use new opportunities as networks and money are necessary but insufficient (see Börzel 2010).

Civil society may prove to be an important pro-democracy actor during the current phase of enlargement, especially if there are candidate countries that prioritise regime survival over democratic consolidation, as demonstrated by the recent developments in Georgia. Therefore, in the absence of a large transnational diffusion of mobilization and hostile national governments, civil society may require increased support from the EU in the future.

Economic factors play a central role in shaping the EU's enlargement strategies. The Copenhagen Criteria emphasise the importance of a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressures within the EU. The economic readiness of candidate countries significantly influences their accession prospects.

Countries with stronger economic fundamentals and greater alignment with EU economic policies generally experience smoother accession processes (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005a). Epstein (2008) argues that the CEE countries have in fact outperformed West European countries in terms of fully integrating into the EU financial market, demonstrated by much higher levels of foreign ownership in banks in CEE. This effect is a result of conditionality, which in CEE countries has been rather effective due to the perception in these countries that they are embedded in a hierarchy topped by the authority of international institutions (Epstein 2008). This perceived subordinated status is strengthened, among other things, by the normative consistency of conditionality and related policies (Epstein 2008; also see Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2009). The benefits of economic integration are substantial. Enlargement has been associated with increased trade, investment and economic growth in new member states. For example, the Visegrád Group countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) experienced significant economic growth post-accession due to increased foreign direct investment (FDI) and access to EU markets (Moravcsik and Vachudova 2005). These economic effects, according to Epstein and Jacoby (2014), have been more sustainable than political ones, as all new member states have suffered from challenges with democratic consolidation.

However, the intense efforts of economic liberalisation have raised questions about social policies within the EU. Copeland (2012) argues that there are two main economic models in the European political economy: liberal capitalism and regulated capitalism. As a result of conditionality, new member states have consistently joined the liberal coalition, which may prevent new initiatives in the field of social policy (Copeland 2012). Consequently, the EU may need to treat its own authority in relation to candidate countries with more caution if Brussels wishes to keep balance between the two models of political economy.

As a result, the progress within the aspirant countries in terms of political and economic reforms is determined by the interplay between domestic societal factors, including the mobilisation of civil society, and external factors such as the normative consistency of conditionality. The EU in both areas is an authority, and as long as it is perceived as such by the national governments, compliance is likely to be higher. However, if national governments start believing that the costs of reforms outweigh their benefits, compliance will likely be sporadic. This is especially important when it comes to regime survival and governments unwilling to let go of power.

3.3. Geopolitical Considerations

There are two ways in which geopolitics can have a profound impact on the EU enlargement process. On the one hand, the EU is interested in keeping its borders stable and neighbourhood peaceful. This mostly concerns conflict-ridden smaller countries. On the other hand, there is great power competition and external threat. The prime example of this is the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia. These considerations come into play not only within the EU decision-making process but also when aspirant countries make their decisions on foreign policy orientation.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union created an opportunity for the EU to stabilise and integrate Eastern Europe into its political and economic framework. The first two phases of enlargement were driven by the EU's strategic interest to keep its borders stable – “a European strategy for geopolitical stabilisation” as Moravcsik and Vachudova (2005: 204) call it. Some authors have argued that a geopolitical explanation is the most robust one to understand the EU eastward enlargement, trumping liberal intergovernmentalist and constructivist approaches because it brings into focus security and stability in Europe (Skålnes 2005). Anghel and Džankić (2023) argue that the Balkan conflicts, such as the war in Kosovo in 1999 and the insurgency in North Macedonia in 2001, along with pressure from the US to make political decisions, had a strong influence on determining the enlargement agenda. However, it must be mentioned that some bilateral conflicts between member states and accession countries, e.g., Greece and Cyprus vis-à-vis Turkey or Greece (see Turhan and Wessels 2021) and Bulgaria vis-à-vis North Macedonia (see Christidis 2019), have negatively impacted the accession process in specific cases. According to Schimmelfennig (2024), the first phase of enlargement was characterised by an improving international context that allowed the EU and candidate countries to progress quickly, while during the second phase, the international context started stagnating due to the friction between Russia and the West and deteriorating since the third phase. This explains why the “big bang” enlargement was an exemplary outcome and why the second phase was protracted. However, the accelerated pace of the third phase shows that the relationship between geopolitics and enlargement is not linear.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 significantly impacted the EU's enlargement strategy. The war underscored the need for the EU to support Eastern European countries aspiring to join the EU, such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, to enhance regional stability and counter Russian aggression (Anghel and Džankić 2023). The EU's decision to grant candidate status to these countries reflects a strategic use of enlargement as a tool for geopolitical security (Schimmelfennig 2024). However, to what extent the EU has been reborn as a geopolitical actor is still unclear (Johansson-Nogues and Leso 2024). The geopoliticized enlargement has been questioned, especially because none of the three countries of the eastern neighbourhood that received a candidate status following the war in Ukraine controls the entirety of the internationally recognised territory. In this context, instead of the enlargement progress being halted altogether, the EU moved quickly, which is a result of the critical threat to the security of the entire Europe. However, the credibility of the promise of membership is repeatedly questioned, and the EU needs to respond to such criticism convincingly.

On the other hand, perceived existential threat does have the potential to derail aspirant countries from their path to EU integration. This is specifically true for these countries. Armenia is a good example in this case, which, poised to sign an Association Agreement with the EU, chose to join the Eurasian Union a couple of months before the 2013 Vilnius Summit. The same scenario happened in Ukraine, but unlike Armenia, Ukraine had a Maidan Revolution which triggered a long-term

aggression of Russia against Ukraine by annexing Crimea and starting a war in Donbas. Some authors have criticised the EU neighbourhood policies for bringing about this result in Ukraine and then being constrained by their own policies (see Howorth 2017). Therefore, considerations related to existential threats can be a double-edged sword for the EU enlargement strategy.

As a result, the EU needs to ensure that its membership offer to the new candidate countries remains credible. Schimmelfennig (2024) argues that the geopoliticized enlargement is facing a dilemma: either the process has to accelerate and overlook democratic and economic conditions, or it will ensure conditions are met but suffer from losing the momentum and stagnating. The second option risks losing the eastern neighbourhood to Russian influence as the candidate trio has no chance to withstand Russian pressure without tangible Western support. These considerations have led various authors to argue that the EU needs to adopt a differentiated integration model. While differentiated integration in the EU is not a novel phenomenon (see Schimmelfennig 2014; Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2020; Schneider 2007), it may be a good fit for the peculiarities of the current geopolitical situation and ensure quick progress to membership to provide security and gradual compliance with conditionality (see Schimmelfennig 2024).

Overall, the existing literature shows that the EU enlargement strategy is a complex phenomenon which is determined by a combination of different factors. These factors are not always correlated with each other, therefore different sets of them may have push and pull effects on the progress of enlargement at any given time. Furthermore, it has been argued that conditions that lead to successful enlargement may differ from the conditions that lead to the failure of the strategy. The simple absence of certain conditions that have a positive impact on enlargement does not necessarily imply that the strategy will fail (see Schwarz 2016). However, it may indicate that the progress will be slower.

4. Effects of EU Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy on the Aspirant Countries

The EU is a transformative power (see Grabbe 2005) which implies that through its policy of conditionality, countries that wish to join the Union become more democratic and develop economically. Indeed, as discussed above, it has been demonstrated that countries with more advanced democracies and well-performing economies have the best chance of becoming members. However, meeting the EU accession criteria does not always guarantee sustainable changes. Some member states have experienced democratic backsliding post-accession, for example, Hungary and Poland have faced criticism for undermining judicial independence and restricting media freedom. Therefore, surveying the effects of the EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy focusing on areas of improvement is an important task that allows drawing lessons for the future political and economic transformations of the EU candidate countries in a new geopolitical context.

4.1. Effects on Political Transformation

One of the primary effects of the EU enlargement strategy on candidate countries is the promotion of political reforms and democratisation. The EU's emphasis on political stability, rule of law and human rights has driven significant changes in candidate countries, leading to reforms such as establishing independent judiciaries, enhancing electoral processes and protecting human and minority rights. EU's conditionality has helped stabilise politically volatile regions such as the Western Balkans by encouraging political reforms and reducing ethnic tensions (Anghel and Džankić 2023). Furthermore, candidate countries are required to establish and strengthen institutions capable of implementing and enforcing EU laws and policies. This involves creating regulatory bodies, enhancing administrative capacity and adopting best practices in governance. These institutional reforms are crucial for building robust governance structures and ensuring that new member states can effectively participate in the EU's decision-making processes. However, there have been side-effects that deserve careful attention from the EU decision-makers in the future. These side-effects are related to the effectiveness of these reforms and domestic political competition and accountability.

When it comes to the effectiveness of reforms aimed at consolidating democratic regimes in candidate countries, the primary question is whether it is possible to comply with conditions without building a consolidated democracy. Dudley (2020), studying Montenegro and Serbia during their accession negotiations, finds that the EU's standards for democracy are deficient. Meeting the conditions set by the EU is insufficient for producing stable democratic institutions and protecting human rights and freedoms in the long-term perspective (Dudley 2020). This is not necessarily because the conditions are flawed; instead, Dudley (2020) argues that the EU allows candidate countries to progress even when they do not fully comply. Some authors have gone further and argue that EU conditionality can be directly linked to state capture in candidate countries (Richter and Wunsch 2019). This linkage, according to Richter and Wunsch (2019), arises due to three factors. Firstly, pressure on undertaking political and economic reforms simultaneously creates opportunities for business actors to influence politics through powerful clientelist networks (Richter and Wunsch 2019). There is evidence that such networks in their turn significantly impede democratic reforms in countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (see Buscaneanu and Li 2024). Secondly, Richter and Wunsch (2019) argue that the top-down nature of EU conditionality weakens accountability and deliberative practices. Finally, echoing Dudley's (2020) findings, Richter and Wunsch (2019) show that formal progress in accession negotiations legitimises corrupt elites. As a result, the EU needs to be cautious in evaluating the extent to which candidate countries comply with conditionality.

Political competition has a built-in responsiveness mechanism (see Bartolini 1999; 2000). When parties compete for power in a democratic context, they need to respond to voter preferences, but this is hindered in the context of top-down conditionality. Similar to Richter and Wunsch's (2019) argument, Vachudova (2008) argues that EU conditionality sets the political agenda in aspirant countries, and

even before the accession negotiations, political parties tend to respond to conditionality by adopting the agenda that is consistent with it. This sort of collusion can happen not only in terms of democratic reforms but also in the field of economic policies even. Ward et al. (2015) show that integration into the EU prevents political parties from differentiating from each other on economic issues. This means that parties offer hardly distinguishable policy options, hindering political competition (Innes 2002). Vachudova (2008) argues, however, that this constraint is lifted post-accession, but this lifting reveals more nationalist and culturally conservative views. Therefore, once again, conditionality may warrant caution from the EU side to ensure that the reform agenda is not externally imposed on the one hand and that political parties are not incentivised to veil their preferences until after the accession.

To sum up, when the EU engages with aspirant countries, two main areas for improvement can be identified from the literature focusing on the effects of conditionality on democratic consolidation. On the one hand, the EU should ensure that aspirant countries meet set conditions, especially to avoid unwanted legitimisation of corrupt elites and practices. On the other hand, the EU should engage perhaps through civil society actors with the citizens as well as political actors in aspirant countries to ensure that the political agenda of conditionality is not perceived as externally imposed and that political parties are given the opportunity to respond to varied preferences among voters.

4.2 Effects on Economic Transformation

The economic effects of the EU enlargement strategy on candidate countries are profound, driving market reforms, economic growth and regional integration. The EU requires candidate countries to establish functioning market economies capable of competing within the EU. This has led to widespread economic reforms, including privatisation, deregulation and the establishment of market-oriented institutions. Furthermore, EU membership provides candidate countries with access to the single market, fostering trade and investment. The Visegrád Group countries, for instance, saw a surge in foreign direct investment (FDI) and trade with EU member states following their accession. This integration into the EU market and economic reforms have been a key driver of economic growth and development in these countries. Another important instrument at the EU's disposal is cohesion policy. EU cohesion policies have been critical in supporting the economic development of new member states. Structural and cohesion funds aim to reduce regional disparities by financing infrastructure projects, education and social programs. East European member states have significantly benefited from this support, driving their economic and social development. However, while the EU enlargement strategy has driven economic growth and, as discussed above, economic transformation seems to be more sustainable than political ones, it has also exposed economic disparities between older and newer member states. New member states often start from a lower economic base, and while they benefit from structural funds and market access, bridging the economic gap remains a significant challenge. These disparities can create tensions within the EU, particularly in the distribution of EU funds and

the mobility of workers. Therefore, regional inequality is the unwanted but persisting feature of economic transformation which could benefit from more attention during the pre-accession period.

Economic disparities are apparent in the enduring East-West divide within the EU, which remains highly salient (Epstein and Jacoby 2014; Volintiru et al. 2024). Although it is understandable that countries that start at a lower level of economic development are going to be catching up, it is important to ensure that a dependent growth model is avoided even before the accession. Otherwise, it can lead to the politicisation of inter-state inequality (see Bruszt and Vukov 2024), while a continuous inflow of foreign capital in the form of foreign direct investments (FDI) has the legitimising effect on governments inclined towards authoritarianism (see Medve-Bálint and Éltető 2024).

Overall, the political side-effects and unwanted economic outcomes of EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy should be a source of lessons learned. At the same time, these problems should not be overlooked or underestimated, as some authors have suggested that post-enlargement findings can complicate the power of external incentives (see Epstein and Sedelmeier 2008). On the other hand, according to Anghel and Jones (2022), the enlargement strategy is most successful as a reactive approach and not a proactive one. The authors maintain that the Eastern enlargement has a strong record of failure because government leaders “did not get what they wanted when they wanted it” but they adapt and re-evaluate their interests (Anghel and Jones 2022: 1093). As a result, the EU has been “failing forward” in order to make the best of the Europe that exists instead of building the best possible one (Anghel and Jones 2022: 1107). This “failing forward” pattern means little more than the ability to respond to crises and adapt accordingly. Therefore, it is in the nature of the EU practice to learn and to improve.

5 Conclusion and Areas of Improvement

The European Union's enlargement policy has been a cornerstone of its strategy to ensure stability, democracy and economic prosperity across Europe. Since the introduction of the Copenhagen Criteria in 1993, the EU has navigated through various phases of enlargement, each characterised by unique challenges and geopolitical contexts. This paper has explored the history, determinants and effects of EU enlargement, providing an overview of its evolution and current state.

It has been shown that since the introduction of the Copenhagen Criteria, the EU enlargement can be divided into three phases: the “big bang” enlargement until 2004; protracted enlargement between 2005-2021; and geopolitical enlargement since 2022. The differences in the EU strategy across these three periods are determined by a range of factors related to the domestic EU context, domestic situation within the aspirant countries and geopolitical considerations. The EU's capacity to transform its members and neighbours is unparalleled. However, there are still some effects of the enlargement and neighbourhood policy that are

unwanted. These include some implications for political and economic transformation of third countries. Yet, such undesirable outcomes should be used as a learning opportunity to adapt for the future.

As the EU faces new geopolitical challenges and internal dynamics, it is crucial to adapt its strategies to ensure the successful integration of future members. By strengthening conditionality mechanisms, enhancing civil society engagement, addressing regional disparities, promoting public engagement and adopting a differentiated integration model, the EU can continue to build a united and prosperous Europe. The lessons learned from past enlargements, combined with a forward-looking and flexible approach, will be essential in shaping the EU's future enlargement policy.

To invigorate the effectiveness of its enlargement policy, the EU should consider the following recommendations:

1. **Strengthen Conditionality Mechanisms:** Ensure that compliance with the Copenhagen Criteria is rigorously monitored and enforced. This can be done by introducing more granular benchmarks and interim assessments to track progress in candidate countries. This will help prevent the legitimisation of corrupt practices and ensure sustainable democratic reforms.
2. **Enhance Civil Society Engagement:** Increase support for civil society organisations in candidate countries. These organisations play a crucial role in promoting democratic values and holding governments accountable. Enhanced EU funding and capacity-building initiatives can empower civil society to be more effective watchdogs and advocates for reform.
3. **Promote Public Engagement and Transparency:** Engage EU citizens and those in candidate countries through public awareness campaigns and transparent communication about the benefits and challenges of enlargement. This can help mitigate Euroscepticism and build broader support for the enlargement process.
4. **Address Regional Disparities:** Implement targeted pre-accession economic support to address regional inequalities. This could involve tailored cohesion policies and investment in infrastructure, education and social programs in less developed regions. Ensuring balanced economic development will foster greater stability and integration readiness.
5. **Adopt a Differentiated Integration Model:** Consider flexible integration arrangements that allow for varying levels of participation in EU policies and institutions. This approach can accommodate the diverse readiness levels of candidate countries while maintaining momentum in the enlargement process. Differentiated integration can also serve as a transitional phase, providing security guarantees and gradual compliance with EU standards.

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About InvigoratEU

InvigoratEU is a Horizon Europe-funded project, coordinated by the EU-Chair at the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) together with the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) in Berlin. The project, with a duration of 3 years from January 2024 until December 2026, examines how the EU can structure its future relations with its Eastern neighbours and the countries of the Western Balkans. The consortium has received around three million euros for this endeavour.

How can the EU invigorate its enlargement and neighbourhood policy to enhance Europe's resilience?

Our first goal is to investigate how to reform the EU's enlargement strategy in a new geopolitical phase, HOW TO RESPOND to other actors' geopolitical ambitions in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans, and HOW TO REBUILD the EU's foreign policy arsenal in view of a new era of military threats (triple "R" approach) combining the modernisation and geopolitical logics of EU enlargement, leading to new data – e.g. a public opinion survey in Ukraine, a set of scenarios, an external influence index (Russia, China, Turkey), and a social policy compliance and cohesion scoreboard.



Our second goal is to elaborate an evidence-based, forward-looking vision for the EU's political agenda and institutional frameworks for co-designing a multidimensional toolbox (i.e. two tailor-made toolkits), together with InvigoratEU's Expert Hub, Civil Society (CS) Network, Youth Labs, Workshops for Young Professionals and Policy Debates in a gaming set up, which will result in context-sensitive and actionable policy recommendations for European and national political stakeholders and (young) European citizens in particular.

Our third goal is to deploy a CDE (communication, dissemination and exploitation) strategy aiming at recommendations from Day 1 to maximize our scientific, policy and societal impact in invigorating the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies to enhance Europe's resilience. Ultimately, InvigoratEU is a deliberately large consortium respecting the diversity of Europe and political perspectives; 7 out of 18 are from Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and the western Balkans (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia), complemented by our Civil Society Network of 9 representatives from all Western Balkan countries, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

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