



POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE EU AND THE CHALLENGES OF ENLARGEMENT

ABSTRACT

Today, enlargement policy is not a base for building electoral consent for any European party – quite the opposite. It is also a highly technical field where political propaganda can easily manipulate public opinion. Stirring fears around new races to the bottom in the sphere of democracy and labour relations around competition for scarce resources or migration is a strategy for gaining votes in most EU countries. Yet, given the EU member states' role in the decision-making around enlargement, the role of national political parties in this policy can be crucial. This policy brief is an enquiry into European national political parties' positions on EU enlargement. It was compiled by gathering information from party programmes, parliamentary debates, news media and think-tank sources. In addition, it relies on interviews with a number of experts and journalists with specific subject matter expertise. It covers selected (non-social democratic) political parties in 13 of 27 member states, chosen on the basis of their relevance to the enlargement process.



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Introduction

This policy brief is a preliminary enquiry into political parties' positions on EU enlargement. It was compiled by gathering information from party programmes, parliamentary debates, news media and think-tank sources. In addition, it relies on interviews with a number of experts and journalists with specific subject matter expertise. However, due to the wide scope of the enquiry, given the large number of parties, and the limited time available, it was not possible to systematically examine each party's programme and platform. Moreover, the brief covers not the whole EU but selected parties in 13 of 27 member states on the basis of their relevance to the enlargement process.

Different understandings of the opportunities and risks of the enlargement process

The significant affirmation of the popularity of right and far-right parties in the June 2024 European elections and in some national elections calls into question the future of enlargement. However, such parties' notion of a sovereigntist EU does not necessarily conflict with the notion of enlargement. This is the view of the Italian party Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia; FdI) and the Hungarian Fidesz party, which belong to two different right-wing political groups in the European Parliament, respectively the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Patriots for Europe (PfE). Both groups consider the widening of the EU to be an antidote to the deepening of the Union's political integration. Other far-right parties, such as the French National Rally (RN), maintain a national tradition of hostility towards enlargement in view of what it considers the national interest. Thus there are contrasting positions within the two main far-right European political groups, the ECR and PfE.¹

Looking at the political platforms for the 2024 European elections, a few general observations can be made. In their manifesto ahead of the European elections, the ECR stated that, while they are open to considering EU enlargement for strategically important countries based on merit and adherence to the Copenhagen criteria, they will not allow enlargement to serve as a pretext for expanding EU powers.² They strongly reject any deepening of political integration resulting from enlargement and oppose any reform of the EU treaties.

In the ECR group, the Polish Law and Justice Party (PiS) is closer to Brothers of Italy's stance, but it privileges Ukraine's accession over that of other countries. The most explicit party in supporting specific candidates is the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR), which goes so far as to consider Moldova an integral part of its national territory, while it is less explicit about the rest of the candidate countries. In addition, the AUR has a historical area of contention with Ukraine over control of Bessarabia and criticises discrimination against the Romanian-speaking minority there. The Sweden Democrats (SD), instead, oppose new enlargements due to concerns about organised crime and potential impacts on labour wages.

Other far-right groups, that is, PfE and the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN),³ are openly hostile towards the accession of new countries. Far-right and nationalist parties in countries such as Austria (Freedom Party, FPÖ), France (National Rally, RN), Germany (Alternative for Germany, AfD) and the Netherlands (Party for Freedom, PVV) oppose enlargement. This view is consistent with their broader scepticism towards the EU.⁴ Moreover, they argue that incorporating more countries could strain the EU's resources and shift political power further eastward. In addition, they fear the risk of migration from the candidate countries.⁵

In the PfE political family, Hungary has a different stance. Fidesz openly endorses enlargement while supporting regional autocratic leaders, such as the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, and Bosnia and Herzegovina's secessionist, Milorad Dodik. Moreover, in the last five years, Fidesz has been able to exercise its hegemony in the region by relying on the role of the former Hungarian Commissioner, Oliver Várhelyi, who held the portfolio of EU enlargement. Finally, Fidesz uses the presence of Hungarian ethnic minorities in its neighbouring candidate countries – Serbia and Ukraine – to increase its influence there.

Following the outbreak of the large-scale war in Ukraine, the EU accepted the candidacy of the so-called Trio (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia). Yet the radical right parties differ in their positions towards Vladimir Putin's Russia, which has had indirect implications for enlargement. While voting in favour of the Trio's inclusion in the EU enlargement policy, Fidesz, with its pro-Russian stance, frequently opposed political and military support for Ukraine in the war.⁶

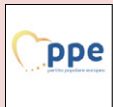
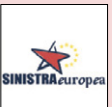
While a pro-Russia approach prevails within the PfE, in the ECR there is instead more ambivalence because of the connections that some parties, such as FdI, have with Russia, or because of their political affinity with Viktor Orbán. This is why the Sweden Democrats, with their strong anti-Russia stance, threatened to quit the ECR group over PiS's and the FdI's ties with Orbán.⁷

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the European Left includes parties such as France Unbowed (France Insoumise) in France, The Left in Germany, Podemos in Spain, SYRIZA in Greece, Sinn Féin in Ireland and the 5 Star Movement (M5S) in Italy (which had observer status for the first five months of the European legislative term).⁸ These parties share a certain degree of Euroscepticism but they are not a

priori hostile to enlargement. The European Left Party's Manifesto affirms that "States can only become members of the EU if they respect human rights, the rule of law, and the social and political rights of their populations, including minorities." The Left's exhortation is to "focus on safeguarding democracy and the rule of law" and, in parallel, on "boosting social cohesion in candidate and member states".⁹ Its main fear is that the accession of new member states may damage social cohesion in the EU and generate a race to the bottom in the labour market as well as in democratic standards. The manifesto stresses that the EU should not "assign the acceding countries the role of suppliers of cheap raw materials, agricultural products and cheap labour, as it is doing already now". Moreover, it generally criticises the arms race as a response to the worsening international context. In this sense, it underlines that EU enlargement policy "must not be an instrument for deepening rifts within Europe and increasing military tensions".

The European People's Party (EPP) is generally a strong advocate of EU enlargement.¹⁰ The EPP manifesto openly supports enlargement for the Western Balkans (WB) and the Trio based on merit, concrete results and the fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria. It explicitly refers to the risk of an endless process but emphasises the importance of candidate countries ensuring respect for democratic institutions, the rule of law, human rights and good relations with EU member states.¹¹ The main EPP party, the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU), was the initiator of the Berlin Process in 2014, which helped to relaunch the process when it was experiencing a deep crisis generated by so-called *enlargement fatigue*. Currently, within the group, parties such as Forza Italia are pushing for the gradual integration of the candidate countries into the single market and consider EU enlargement as a key geopolitical opportunity in terms of security and the economy.

Figure 1. European parties' position on different aspects of EU enlargement

✓ In favour ✗ Against ○ Does not express a clear opinion		PARTY ANALYSED					
		European People's Party 	Part of European Socialists 	Renew Europe 	Greens 	European Conservatives and Reformists Party 	European Left 
ENLARGEMENT	Respect of Copenhagen criteria	○	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Amending EU Treaties	○	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓
	Turkey accession	✗	✗	○	✗	○	○
	Ukraine accession	✓	✓	✓	✓	○	○
	Western Balkan countries accession	✓	✓	✓	✓	○	○

Source: <https://www.eunews.it/en/2024/05/20/the-parties-election-programs-6-eu-enlargement-promises-and-the-intertwined-fate-of-the-treaties/>

The liberals of Renew Europe, in their political manifesto for the 2024 parliamentary elections under the heading "Renew Europe and unify the continent", stressed that reform should happen as soon as new member states are prepared to join the EU and are on their way to fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria. They strongly support Ukraine's accession to the EU. They also support the reopening of the EU treaties and abolishing the right of veto in some policy fields, such as for the accession of new member states in the Schengen area once they are ready.¹²

The Greens' political manifesto underlines that an enlarged and unified EU will be a stronger entity than the current EU. They advocate for a federal Europe with a robust democratic framework and call for renewed enlargement of the EU. They support the accession of the WB countries and the Trio. In their view, accession

should be merit-based, focusing on rule of law and democracy. They also call for more civil society engagement in the enlargement process. They argue that welcoming new members should inspire reforms within the EU, which would improve decision-making. Thus, they are in favour of the introduction of qualified majority voting (QMV) in more policy areas, starting with enlargement policy.¹³

Figure 1 summarises the positions of European parties and groups on various policy issues.¹⁴

Political parties and the bilateral disputes that hamper the enlargement process

Bilateral disputes have been among the biggest obstacles to advancing negotiations on enlargement. Far-right parties are not alone in

having brought bilateral historical grievances into the enlargement process; such issues have been raised by members across all political groups. The credit for resolving the issues between Greece and North Macedonia goes to SYRIZA (The Left), while the historical responsibility for initiating the dispute lies with the Greek socialist party PASOK (PES/S&D).

Currently, there are many bilateral issues that complicate the accession process. For example, there are issues between Ukraine and Romanian nationalists regarding the treatment of the Romanian-speaking minority; between Ukraine and Hungarian nationalists regarding the Hungarian-speaking minority; and between Ukraine and Polish nationalists concerning crimes committed during the Second World War. As for the WB, all neighbouring countries, with the exception of Romania, have contentious issues with them, ranging from minority protection to border definition, as in the case of Croatia with the other former Yugoslav republics.

Among the bilateral disputes is the unresolved issue of Kosovo's independence, as five member states (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain) still do not recognise Kosovo as a sovereign state. In Spain, only the Sumar coalition (The Left, The Greens/EFA) seems ready to change position on Kosovo's independence. In all other cases, there are no signs that positions will change. This stalemate has negative consequences as it excludes Kosovo from many organisations, initiatives and political opportunities, thus worsening prospects for resolving the political conflict with Serbia.

Moreover, it should be noted that in some of the countries that have recognised Kosovo, nationalist political groups nonetheless show an open pro-Serbian bias. This is true of Austria, for instance, where the current major political formations have been reversing their traditional

support for regional cooperation in the WB in favour of open political support for the Serbian cause.

In the first instance, member states' internal political issues negatively affect enlargement policy.¹⁵ In the second case, it is sovereignist ideas that influence attitudes towards selectively supporting candidate countries perceived as aligning with their vision of the Union. This second approach has negative consequences for cooperation at the regional level and the enlargement process overall, as the EU fails to act as an honest broker in the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue, and the consequences of the emergence of pro-Serbian stances further destabilise Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The results of the first deliberative democracy experiment

Today, enlargement policy is not a base for building electoral consent for any European party – quite the opposite. Enlargement is a highly technical field where political propaganda can easily manipulate public opinion. Stirring fears around new races to the bottom in the sphere of democracy and labour relations around competition for scarce resources or migration is a strategy for gaining votes in most EU countries.

However, the European Greens' manifesto makes an important point, which reflects the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe:

European citizens gave a clear message that they support new treaties giving the EU greater competences. They called for deepened European democracy, with more power for the European Parliament, an end to national vetoes, a larger EU budget, and stronger EU competences on key issues such as health, tax, and social protection.¹⁶

The Conference on the Future of Europe was the first European experiment in deliberative democracy, and it generated results in favour of both deepening and widening the EU. This indicates that when people are given the opportunity to make informed and cooperative decisions their preferences lean towards European integration. The lesson learned from that important first experiment should be taken into account and expanded, for the benefit of the enlargement process and beyond.

While there appears to be little enthusiasm around enlargement, many political parties stress the risks of leaving the WB behind and/or underline the geopolitical relevance of integrating the Trio into the EU. The majority of ECR members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have so far voted in favour of enlargement, while the PfE MEPs tend to vote against or abstain. However, the two main far-right groups may complicate matters regarding financial assistance for the policy.

Those parties that see the importance of completing the process of enlargement both for the Union's interests and for the benefit of candidate countries should address the issue of the redistribution of funds for cohesion and agriculture. Moreover, they should ensure that populists do not frame public debate as a zero-sum game but rather highlight the relevance of enlargement for a stronger continent in a world of competing global powers.¹⁷

It is important to shift the narrative away from the narrow vision of what constitutes the national interest in the current context.¹⁸ On the one hand, we should recall the looming challenges, but on the other hand, we also need to look to the future with courage and ambition. The deliberation of European citizens at the Conference on the Future of Europe should serve as guidance in this sense.

To conclude, as effectively summarised by Federico Baccini in his analysis of the European party programmes for the 2024 European elections:

the Populists stress the rules of the accession path, the Socialists bet on an "effective" policy and "targeted" changes, and the Liberals urge reopening the Treaties. The Greens for a new push and an end to unanimity in the Council, the Conservatives reject the idea of deepening EU political integration, and the Left focuses on safeguarding democratic values.¹⁹

As national context often prevails over compromises reached in Brussels, it is important to analyse a few domestic political scenarios in more detail.

Austria

While public opinion in Austria shows little support for the enlargement process, so far the country's traditional mainstream parties – the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ, PES/S&D) and the ÖVP (EPP) – have actively supported the WB integration process.²⁰ Although it was not the main focus of their political campaigns, radical-right parties such as the FPÖ (PfE) positioned themselves as ambivalent or even openly hostile towards EU enlargement, thus capitalising on popular scepticism.²¹

In the 2024 Austrian legislative election, support for the FPÖ surged from 16% to 29.2%, securing the party's prime position and marking its best result ever. The party's foreign policy has changed over time: in the 1960s, when the majority of Austrians preferred to remain equidistant from the Western and Soviet blocs, it was federalist. In the 1990s, when Austria negotiated its EU accession, the FPÖ started criticising EU bureaucracy and the threat the

EU posed to national identity. While the party is generally not favourable to the EU and its enlargement, it shows support for ethno-nationalists such as Dodik in the Republika Srpska of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Balkans. FPÖ aligns with Serbia in the political conflict with Kosovo, which contradicts the national stance that acknowledges Pristina's independence. The FPÖ has taken a pro-Russia stance, opposing EU sanctions imposed on Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine. There have been allegations of financial support from Russian oligarchs, and recent new scandals have involved party representatives suspected of enabling Russian espionage in the country.²²

The other far-right party, the Team HC Strache–Alliance for Austria (THC), is also sceptical of the EU and its enlargement to the WB and Ukraine, and it firmly opposes the idea of financing a collective EU debt to support Ukraine.

The ÖVP has traditionally endorsed enlargement and has shown explicit support for Austrian business interests in the region, where Austrian banks, insurance companies and firms have a significant presence. Under Sebastian Kurz's leadership, the party moved to the right, openly supporting local autocrats such as Aleksandar Vučić, as a result of its leader's strong personal relationship with the Serbian president. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, some party leaders have emphasised the need for a quicker and more inclusive enlargement towards countries of the WB, fearing that they might be left behind.²³

Among the Austrian progressive parties, the Greens are not hostile to enlargement but have limited interest in foreign policy. Their main concerns, where the Balkans are involved, are migrants' rights on the Balkan route as well as the protection of democracy and the rule of law.

Finally, the New Austria and Liberal Forum (NEOS, Renew Europe) advocates for the United States of Europe. It is openly in favour of the enlargement process but underlines the need for full respect of the rule of law and democracy in candidate countries. NEOS would not support any country ruled by autocratic leaders joining the EU for fear that the anti-liberal front in the EU would grow stronger.

Belgium

The specificity of party politics in Belgium lies in the fact that the two major national components have different dynamics and are influenced by their neighbouring countries: the Flemish discuss the issue of enlargement along similar lines as their counterparts in the Netherlands, while the Belgian French speakers are influenced by the debate in France.

The Christian Democrats and Flemish (CD&V) are a centre-right, socially conservative party inside the EPP. They support the enlargement ambitions of countries such as Ukraine and other candidates. However, they support accession only if all criteria for EU membership are respected. They believe that the EU must also work on reforming its internal structure alongside enlargement.²⁴

The liberal parties that are members of Renew Europe – such as the Reformist Movement (MR), Les Engagées and Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats (VLD) – do not explicitly mention their stance on enlargement. However, they prioritise reform of the EU itself over enlargement.²⁵ The MR and VLD are conservative liberal parties in favour of free markets, while the Les Engagées are progressive liberals.

The New Flemish Alliance (N-VA, ECR) is a right-wing Flemish conservative party that does not mention enlargement explicitly but stands for a

strong Flanders in a strong Europe and seeks the deepening of EU integration. This suggests that they are neither strong supporters of enlargement nor against it in principle.²⁶

Both Ecolo and Groen! are parties in favour of enlargement, although they do not have a strong position on the issue. They share the position of the rest of the European Greens.²⁷

The Workers' Party of Belgium (PVDA/PTB, The Left) is a radical left party. It questions the enlargement policy on the ground that it may have negative consequences for workers; it is particularly sceptical about Ukraine's entering the EU.²⁸ Marc Botenga, a PTB political representative, declared to *Le Soir* that Ukraine joining the EU was neither realistic nor desirable.²⁹

The Vlaams Belang (VB, PflE) is a Flemish nationalist party which is strongly anti-immigrant and stands for an independent Flanders. It opposes what it calls the "enlargement drive of the EU" and enlargement overall, it is strongly against the idea of Turkey's accession and it is very critical of what it calls EU bureaucracy and interference in areas where it believes national sovereignty should prevail. The party also believes that the territory of the EU should not exceed European borders. It identifies itself as a "Eurorealistic" party. The official party website states that "the EU should not be taken for granted. The European Union can only have enough support if it manages to make the right choices – and dares to do so."³⁰

Bulgaria

The major political parties in Bulgaria are generally in favour of enlargement, even though support for Eurosceptic political forces has grown in recent years. The emergence of more centrist parties has created some diversification, but the lack of a clear dividing line between the

right and left wings makes for a chaotic political environment. The difficulties in forming a stable government – Bulgaria has held seven general elections since 2021 – generate broader uncertainty regarding EU alignment.

Despite being a full EU member since 2007, Bulgaria was only partially involved in the integration process before its joining the Schengen area on 1 January 2025. This partial involvement influenced its approach to other countries' accession.

Regarding the nuances in political parties' positions on the enlargement process, support for Albania's entry is broad across the Bulgarian political spectrum. At the same time, a significant portion of this spectrum – especially the pro-Russian nationalist movements – maintains an inflexible attitude towards North Macedonia, which has been asked to include the Bulgarian ethnic minority in its constitution before starting EU accession negotiations.

The pro-Russian and anti-EU stance of Revival (ESN) has resonated with voters who feel disillusioned by the EU's influence on Bulgarian affairs. Its consistent electoral performance points to significant support for Eurosceptic views within Bulgaria.³¹

The largest party in the country, the centre-right GERB (EPP), created with German patronage, presents itself as pro-EU and pro-Western, and sends competent representatives to the EU Parliament. However, GERB does not hesitate to adopt more nationalistic positions if it deems it politically useful, especially in the country's climate of constant electoral campaigning.

The liberal coalition of We Continue the Change–Democratic Bulgaria (Renew Europe, EPP), which entered the Bulgarian political scene with the ambition of marginalising GERB and

its historic leader Boyko Borissov, was initially successful. However, it suffered significant losses at a later stage, reflecting a decline in public confidence in pro-European parties. This decline raises questions about the future of EU support and reform initiatives in Bulgaria.

The Movement for Rights and Freedom Party, established as an ethnic Turkish minority party, supports the EU. Its stance on enlargement, however, is influenced by a complex interplay of internal and external political influences, which led the party to split before the October 2024 elections.

There is a perception in Bulgaria that Serbia would not join the EU due to its Russian and Chinese leanings. This echoes a number of fears, such as that Bulgaria could become a sort of "Russian Trojan horse" within the EU, similar to Hungary. Future membership for Turkey is widely seen as an unlikely prospect in Bulgaria and is strongly rejected by local nationalist parties.

Croatia

The mainstream Croatian parties show their support for enlargement in their platforms but all specify the need to fully respect the Copenhagen criteria for candidate countries. The current government, led by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ, EPP) and Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, regularly underlines the importance of enlargement for their country.³²

The extreme right-wing Croatian parties that are Eurosceptic and have a sovereignist view of the EU, such as the Homeland Movement (DP) and the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP), are cautiously in favour of enlargement. The DP, however, expresses concerns about the potential economic and social costs, because supporting financially weaker countries would require significant EU financial assistance.³³

It should be noted that Croatia has various open dossiers with all its neighbouring countries on the issue of defining state borders: with Serbia, the border along the Danube is not well defined; with Bosnia and Herzegovina, the border issue near Neum is similarly unresolved; and with Montenegro, the maritime border is yet to be agreed upon.

Slovenia caused difficulties for Croatia during the long negotiations over border issues and Croatia is likely to do the same with the countries of the WB. Other pending issues include the missing persons from the wars in the 1990s, war criminals who have not been tried and the issue of the Croatian minority in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including their demand for electoral law reforms.

France

Traditionally, French centre-right parties see the 2004 enlargement as having jeopardised the deepening of the political Union. Moreover, they consider it as having economically benefited Germany at France's expense. Similarly, in the field of security, they see enlargement as having weakened France's position, as it coincided with NATO expansion. France sees itself as having a "*responsabilité particulière*" in the world order, beyond the United States' hegemony. In the Gaullist tradition, continued by the centre-right, France should not advocate for a federal Union; its preference is for an intergovernmentalist approach.

However, the large-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia had an impact on the moderate centre and right-wing parties. President Emmanuel Macron saw a role for France in the new scenario, where eastern enlargement became a geopolitical priority. He gave a special twist to this Gaullist tradition, advocating for an intergovernmental deepening of the Union, with

France identifying itself as *primus inter pares*. In his view, the EU could enhance France's role in the world. This line of thinking emerged as a result of the war in Ukraine. For geopolitical reasons, Macron recognised France's industrial and military interests in investing in the east. However, today's positive disposition towards enlargement includes the awareness that it will be subject to an unavoidable referendum, allowing France to potentially halt the process in its final stages.

National Rally (PfE) has not changed its hostile stance towards the policy. Economic factors, migration and hostility towards countries with Muslim communities motivate this negative view. RN sees the EU as a Christian-only project, and its leaders use derogatory expressions to describe the countries in the WB with Muslim populations. The fear of new migration from candidate countries has led them to underline their low wages. Criminality is also used as an argument to label some Balkan countries "mafia states".

RN is against extending QVM to other fields, including the intermediate steps of enlargement, as suggested by various think tanks and the so-called Group of Twelve, a working group on EU institutional reforms convened by the French and German governments.³⁴ From the RN's sovereignist perspective, retaining veto power in the EU is essential to the protection of the national interest. Building on France's historical pro-Serbian stance, RN has established inter-party relations in the WB with Serbian President Vučić and Bosnian-Serb secessionist Dodik.

On the far left, France Unbowed (The Left), led by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, has never really defended the enlargement process. Its position is mostly Eurosceptic and sees further expansion as unlikely to improve the situation.

Germany

The Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU, EPP) has been largely in favour of enlargement and has committed the country to the so-called Berlin Process, aimed at relaunching the WB integration process when it stalled ten years ago. CDU/CSU has emphasised the importance of the Copenhagen criteria as preconditions for being accepted as a new EU member.

On the other side of the political spectrum, enlargement policy – in particular concerning Ukraine's accession – is strongly opposed by parties such as AfD (ESN). Their concerns are related not only to the issue of increasing immigration, but also to higher EU costs. Although AfD expresses its opposition to Ukrainian accession by citing economic costs, its positive relations with Putin's Russia also explain this stance.

While AfD claims that EU accession will further drain the labour force from candidate countries and would not benefit the latter, they side with a few ethno-nationalist autocrats. In fact, AfD openly sides with Serbia in its political conflict with Kosovo, taking a revisionist stance by arguing against Kosovo's independence, which contrasts with Germany's traditional position on the issue. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, AfD supports the idea of creating a third entity for the Croats, adopting a clear stance against the Muslim population.

The Greens' approach can be labelled as "strict but fair", as they endorse the process but require full compliance with the Copenhagen criteria. The party clearly endorsed the relaunch of the Berlin Process, which celebrated ten years of engagement with the WB in 2024.

The Left Party (The Left) believes there is a need for more social inclusion and welfare for all EU

citizens, a goal which can be achieved through enlargement. However, it maintains that the EU should first address its internal problems before considering enlargement.³⁵

Italy

Traditionally, all Italian governments in the last three decades have been in favour of EU enlargement. Current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni (Fdi, ECR) has visited the WB repeatedly, underlining her open support for the region's accession. Similarly, she has shown support for integration of the Trio on various occasions.

However, Meloni's main focus is on the migration agreement with Albania, a topic that is seen as a price candidate countries must pay to gain the favour of member states. At the same time, some fear that by taking on a role similar to Turkey's in the reception of asylum seekers, candidate countries risk ending up in the same limbo.

Current Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani is the leader of Forza Italia, the party founded by Silvio Berlusconi, which belongs to the EPP. Since the beginning of his mandate, Tajani has shown a strong interest in economic cooperation with the WB and has worked to stimulate investment by Italian firms in the region.

The third party of the governing coalition is the Lega (PFI). The party's main concern is restricting immigration, though Eastern Europeans who have integrated into the country are no longer the main target of xenophobic campaigns. With a strong electoral base in the northern regions of the country, the Lega sees the WB as a market. All the current governing coalition's parties had good relations with the Kremlin prior to the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, but they subsequently aligned with US foreign policy. Following Donald Trump's

election in November 2024, there has been a wide expectation of a softening towards Russia, even if it is unlikely that Italy will take a position hostile to the Trio's integration. In any case, the Italian coalition shares the outlook of the sovereignist EU; on this view, the accession of more countries limits the risk of further political integration.

What Lorenzo Mosca defined as the "eclectic populism" of the M5S in the case of its foreign policy entails an elusive positioning "mixing national securitisation and international humanitarianism".³⁶ In the case of the WB, the programme for the 2024 European elections clearly endorsed the enlargement process:

We strongly support the accession of the Western Balkan countries to the European project. This process must be accelerated and we see their integration into the European Union as a natural step in the evolution of the Union. These countries are geographically, socially and culturally European *in toto* and their inclusion would bring benefits to all parties involved. The legitimate European aspirations of many countries must be measured by respecting all the necessary stages and conditions, without accepting shortcuts or facilitations based on the circumstances.³⁷

The programme makes no reference to the Trio's accession, as the M5S is focused on criticism of the EU arms race generated by the war in Ukraine, which "not only requires public spending but also provides stratospheric profits to arms manufacturers, banks and investment firms that support them". The predominant focus of the party is the need to stop the war in Ukraine:

We have condemned Putin's invasion from the very beginning. We fully support the Ukrainian people, but now we say enough to the sending of new weapons and we pursue peace in all

ways. The European Union must return to being a protagonist on the international stage by promoting incisive diplomatic actions aimed at an immediate ceasefire and the start of negotiations to reach a political, fair, balanced and lasting solution, working immediately for a Peace Conference to be held under the aegis of the United Nations.³⁸

The party is often criticised for not being sufficiently hostile to Putin's Russia, but this trait is common to the whole political spectrum in the country. A conciliatory attitude towards Moscow prevails in Italy due to differing political traditions, with a few minor political exceptions. Finally, the M5S joined The Left in the European Parliament with observer status after years of uncertainty about its political alignment at EU level.

The Green and Left Alliance (The Greens/EFA, AVS, The Left) is not particularly concerned with the issue of enlargement. At the same time, its political programme mentions the need for a reform of the EU treaties: it calls for a "federal, fair and inclusive Europe" with a common foreign policy capable of reshaping international relations in a multilateral framework in dialogue with the United Nations. The AVS does not take an explicit stance in favour of enlargement; its vision of a common foreign and defence policy implies that the EU should act as a united force and incorporate additional members. Regarding Ukraine, the idea is that the EU should counter global militarisation and become an active protagonist of a peace process.³⁹

The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, most parties see enlargement as a promise already made, with discussions now focused on how best to implement it. The current governing coalition (VVD, NSC, BBB, PVV) advocates a strict approach to

enlargement – this does not reject the process but emphasises the need for candidate countries to meet all criteria fully.

The Forum for Democracy (FvD, ESN) and Party for Freedom (PVV, PfiE) are far-right, populist and Eurosceptic parties. They both oppose new enlargements. While the PVV has shifted its position to advocate for EU reform from within, it no longer supports an exit from the Union, something that only the FvD now occasionally supports.

The New Social Contract (NSC, EPP) is a centre-right party that split from the Christian Democrats. It is relatively pro-European and open to EU enlargement but does not fully support all European initiatives. The Farmer–Citizen Movement (BBB, EPP) does not explicitly mention a position on EU enlargement. It will likely align with the governing coalition's position of supporting enlargement, with a focus on strict adherence to the Copenhagen criteria.

Within the governing coalition, the PVV takes a stricter stance while the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and NSC are a bit more open to enlargement. The VVD is among the most important parties in the country and has recently shown some support for the EU geopolitical approach regarding an accelerated economic integration of candidate countries with a strong rule of law conditionality. Under the leadership of Mark Rutte, the VVD became more aware of the EU's added value and the geopolitical importance of European enlargement. However, the stance of the coalition as a whole remains strict.⁴⁰

Concerning the opposition political forces, the Labour Party (PvdA, PES/S&D) and Green Left (The Greens/EFA) merged for the European elections, presenting a joint list of candidates and social media. Both are generally supportive

of EU enlargement.⁴¹ Democrats 66 (D66, Renew Europe) is a progressive liberal party and is federalist with respect to the EU; it supports both a deepening and a widening of the EU. Volt (The Greens/EFA), a pan-European and strongly pro-EU party like D66, also supports the EU integration of more countries.

The Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA, EPP) is traditionally a pro-EU party, though its influence has declined. It favours EU enlargement but insists on the strict fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria.

DENK, a party that represents ethnic minority interests, is left-leaning on economic issues and more conservative on cultural matters. They do not have a clear stance on EU enlargement and would likely align with the stance of any coalition they join.

Poland

The novelty in Poland's political context is Konfederacja (ESN), a far-right, ultra-liberal party, primarily supported by small and medium entrepreneurs. It is staunchly anti-EU and has shown some anti-Ukrainian sentiments. This party is gaining popularity in Poland, especially among young people – an example of the spread of the right wing in Europe.

In Poland generally there is a broad consensus on enlargement, resulting from the country's positive experience of its earlier European integration. Most Polish parties support a geopolitical union, not only in relation to Ukraine but also in relation to the WB. There are no specific concerns with the rule of law in the region.

The former ruling party, Law and Justice (PiS, ECR) is in favour of enlargement and is particularly supportive of Ukrainian accession,

which is considered important for its national security.⁴² PiS has been active in supporting Ukraine's application for EU candidate status and it views enlargement as a way of countering Russian influence in Eastern Europe. However, there are sources of conflict, including historical grievances (for example, the Volhynia massacre) and some concern surrounding the possible negative economic impacts on its eastern regions. While large businesses see the integration of Ukraine as an economic opportunity, the PiS electorate consists of small farmers and business people who feel threatened by Ukrainian imports, which explains why the party supported a ban on Ukrainian wheat imports.

Since December 2023, the Polish government has been held by a coalition formed by Civic Coalition (which includes the Civic Platform), the Polish People's Party, Poland 2050 and New Left (PES/S&D).

The Polish People's Party (PSL, EPP) mainly represents rural and agricultural interests. It supports EU enlargement but, like PiS, is concerned about competition from Ukraine's agriculture sector, reflecting the anxieties of its voter base, which is comprised primarily of farmers.

The strongest supporter of enlargement is the conservative party Poland 2050 (Renew Europe), a new, highly pro-European party that takes a technocratic stance to governance. It believes in a fact-based, pragmatic approach towards EU policies and stresses the possible benefits of expansion for stability and regional cooperation.

The centre-right party Civic Platform (PO, EPP) is a generally keen advocate of enlargement as it favours a strong geopolitical union. The party takes a careful position on balancing the

challenges of integrating Ukraine and the other candidate countries.

While PiS is opposed to internal EU reforms and wants unanimity in foreign policy, PO is open to the debate but prioritises enlargement over internal reform. It argues that since much time has already been lost in the development of a new methodology, member states and candidate countries have to be convinced that there is new momentum for enlargement.

Romania

The National Liberal Party (PNL, EPP) is in favour of EU enlargement towards Ukraine, Moldova and the WB. The same is true of the Union for the Salvation of Romania (URS, Renew Europe) and the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR, EPP).

The AUR (ECR) is not a priori against enlargement but has concerns about the protection of Romanian minorities in neighbouring countries, holds Eurosceptic views and supports the concept of a "Europe of Nations". AUR does not consider Moldova a sovereign state and believes it should be annexed to Romania.

S.O.S. Romania can be classified as an extreme-right party which holds Eurosceptic views; it has two non-attached members in the European Parliament and it entered the Romanian Parliament for the first time at the December 2024 elections. Romania only joined the Schengen area in January 2025 due to the Austrian veto. This situation has led to public debates in Romania on the potential use of QMV, although not for EU enlargement.

In the past, there were bilateral issues with Ukraine concerning the right of the Romanian minority to receive education in the Romanian language. Since the war in Ukraine began,

Romania has adopted a strong pro-Ukraine stance, setting aside bilateral disputes.

Romania is one of the five EU member states that do not recognise Kosovo's independence. In general, Romania's political parties maintain good relations with Serbian President Vučić.⁴³

Slovenia

All parties across the mainstream political spectrum are in favour of enlargement. There is no debate on this issue: it is considered a central priority in Slovenian politics. Slovenia was interested in holding the enlargement portfolio in the next European Commission to actively push for the rapid integration of the WB.

In the future, there may be issues related to the succession with Serbia. Regarding Ukraine, there is less enthusiasm and if any of the Trio countries were prioritised over the WB for EU accession, Slovenia might show some resistance, though it is likely that this would not be explicit. As a small country, Slovenia's foreign policy tends to focus on regional interests, with a limited emphasis on broader issues.

Part of its society shows some understanding of Russian positions in the current international scenario but, overall, Slovenian public opinion views with concern the disintegration of international law caused by the ongoing international crises.

Spain

The topic of EU enlargement has never been prominent on the Spanish domestic agenda. Recently, Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez has increased Spain's engagement with the issue at EU level, even if it remains marginal in public discussion and in Parliament.

Nonetheless, Spanish public opinion is among the most pro-enlargement in the EU. The positive national experience with EU integration has shaped its attitude. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, public opinion in Spain has been slightly more engaged in the topic, becoming even more positive about enlargement.

The Partido Popular (PPE, EPP) has always been a proudly pro-EU party and this stance has translated into a positive attitude towards enlargement. However, it is not as enthusiastic as the Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE, PES/S&D), as it tends to be more protective of national interests. In addition, in the past, it was sceptical about the accession of Turkey as a large country with a Muslim population. However, the PPE has remained fundamentally pro-EU. The only exception is the issue of Kosovo's independence: Spain will be ready to recognise Kosovo when an agreement with Serbia is reached. They do not want to risk any actions that might anger Serbia or trigger more calls for independence in Catalonia and the Basque Country.

Right-wing Vox (Pfe) does not see enlargement as a prominent issue. It is opposed to Turkey's accession but does not have a clearly defined position. It is unlikely to accept new members without guarantees. At the same time, it is supportive of new members that reinforce its vision of the EU as a union of sovereign nations. Recently, Vox moved in the European Parliament from the ECR group to the Pfe group, which is more in Orbán's sphere of influence. Since Orbán favours EU enlargement, Vox is likely to take an increasingly favourable view of it.

The junior coalition member, Sumar (The Left, The Greens/EFA), which is composed of smaller parties and a split from Podemos, is the most progressive in regard to enlargement. Some

members have gone so far as to advocate for the recognition of Kosovo.

Additionally, some smaller regionalist parties that play a role in the national political scene are particularly supportive of Kosovo and are outspoken on the issue, as they tie their own independence to that of other nations. For regionalist parties, EU enlargement is a less popular topic, but there has been no indication that they would oppose it.

All parties in Spain are highly supportive of Ukraine in its war of defence against the Russian invasion.⁴⁴ Only Podemos (The Left) argues for a pro-peace stance, believing that dialogue with Russia is necessary. For now, the Trio's accession is not a prominent topic in the country and is considered something that is not likely to happen in the near future.

Sweden

EU enlargement is not widely debated in Sweden. The EU sometimes arises as an issue, but national politics prevails and the topic is not broadly discussed. Liberals are generally pro-EU, and the governing coalition does not support the exit of Sweden from the EU, unlike the right-wing and some radical-left parties, which take a Eurosceptic stance critical of the EU.

Centre-right and centrist parties are all pro-enlargement if candidate countries meet the criteria and are open to the policy. The radical left supports enlargement but is critical of the market liberalisation that it believes would accompany it.

On the question of Ukraine, every party has been open to its integration. Since Russian aggression gained more focus in Sweden, the Trio has become more relevant than the WB, and EU-Ukrainian relations are more frequently debated.

Migration is a key issue in public debate, particularly in relation to non-European migrants from the Middle East and other regions, except for the Romani, who are highly stigmatised.

While most Swedish political parties are in favour of EU enlargement, there are minor differences depending on the party's perspective and whether enlargement satisfies certain conditions. The SPÖ (PES/S&D) generally agrees with most other parties that enlargement should occur whenever the agreed criteria for integration are met by the candidate countries.

The Greens support EU enlargement, especially if it contributes to stability in the region. The Moderate Party (EPP) also supports EU enlargement. In keeping with other centrist and pro-EU parties in Sweden, the party considers enlargement as a means to improve stability and cooperation across the continent.

The Sweden Democrats (ECR) have traditionally been very Eurosceptic and have supported Sweden's exit from the EU. Recently, they have softened this position to one that is critical of the EU but not outrightly hostile to EU enlargement. Most notably, when it comes to a country such as Ukraine, they would support its accession due to shared political interests.

While the Christian Democrats (KD, EPP) are somewhat more cautious than the overtly pro-EU parties, they generally favour expanding the EU so long as this reinforces European stability and security. Their approach to enlargement is thus more measured and pragmatic.

The Liberals (L, Renew Europe) are one of the most EU-friendly parties in Sweden and are strongly in favour of enlargement, especially as a means of promoting European values and cooperation. The Centre Party (C, Renew Europe) also promotes enlargement, provided it

contributes to deeper European cooperation and increased stability. It underlines that countries applying for integration should be well prepared and meet EU standards.

Overall, while there may be some nuances in the positions of individual parties, most Swedish parties favour EU enlargement, especially if the candidate countries meet the political, economic and legal criteria. The debate about enlargement in Sweden is limited, with immigration and domestic policy tending to dominate.

Concluding remarks

What most political parties in the EU lack is a vision for the enlargement process that does not reduce it to its market dimensions or its role in the geopolitical confrontation with Russia. It is clear that, beyond rhetorical support, the EU enlargement process will not find many determined supporters among European political parties in the next few years. There are too many obstacles from member states. If QMV is not introduced to handle the intermediary steps of the process, bilateral issues will continue to emerge and jeopardise the coherent advancement of the policy.

While such bilateral disputes will continue to weaken the conditionality mechanism that should support the full implementation of the Copenhagen criteria, there are also risks associated with some member states favouring politically aligned countries. This is the approach of Marine Le Pen with the RN in France, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary and Herbert Kickl's FPÖ in Austria. For these three far-right political leaders, Serbia is the only WB country that should enter the EU; they view it as a like-minded member that can contribute to reforming the EU in a sovereignist direction.

Among other things, they undermine the regional approach needed to solve the ongoing political conflicts in the WB. For years, the European Commission has invested in promoting regional cooperation. This choice should not be abandoned now, especially after the recent confirmation that, with due political pressure, results can be achieved. Thanks to the Berlin Process, in October, the long-lasting deadlock in the Central European Free Trade Agreement was finally overcome.⁴⁵

While reversing the deepening of the EU can be achieved simply by incorporating more members into an unreformed political Union, transforming it into an ordinary international organisation, what is at stake here is also the fragile status quo in the WB.

The WB countries are currently under new pressure, as highlighted by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in its gloomy picture of the current situation. The new Trump presidency in the United States might be tempted to revive the dangerous land swap proposal between Serbia and Kosovo, which could in turn justify the separatist aspirations of Bosnian Serbs. In this context the advice is to prepare "a package of new deterrence mechanisms that it can apply in the Western Balkans independently from the US and spoiler member states like Hungary".⁴⁶

Although during the hearing of newly designated Commissioner Marta Kos it was announced that Montenegro could close all negotiating chapters by 2026 and Albania by 2027, this will not entail their immediate accession for a number of reasons, including the need for referendums in countries such as France and the Netherlands.⁴⁷

Instead, a realistic option available for the candidate countries, one widely supported among European parties with different political

orientations, is gradual integration into the single market. In the best-case scenario, it would be accompanied by incorporation in the cohesion policy before accession. This transitory phase could improve their economic situation and increase the political willingness to accept these countries as part of the political Union at a later date.

In the case of the WB, such an EU political consensus supporting the gradual integration of candidate countries into the single market depends on the results of regional cooperation. Therefore, fostering political animosities by favouring some ethno-nationalist leaders over others can only damage the whole region. In this sense, strengthening cooperation to combat the spread of selective ethno-national support is necessary to achieve concrete results, including in the field of economic integration, which many parties in the EPP are ready to support.

It should be remembered that the reasons for gradually integrating the candidate countries into the cohesion policy before accession include the need for resources to support the expensive but urgent need for decarbonisation. It is apparent, in the case of the WB, that they need three times more resources than those currently invested in the green transition. Similarly, Ukraine, facing the long-term consequences of the war, will need even more support and a much stronger commitment than is available today. This should encourage a stronger alliance with the Greens and the Left in the European Parliament to increase the resources of the common budget to meet the pressing needs and ambitions within the EU and its wider European space.

However, the emerging scenarios in EU-WB relations are currently running in the opposite direction. The EU is seen as an extractivist power endangering the candidate countries'

environment for its own advantage. The EU–Serbia Memorandum of Understanding on critical raw materials is a case in point; it weakens the already compromised reputation of the EU in the region.⁴⁸ Awareness of this problem should increase the recognition among European parties that applying double standards generates a backlash: there is a price to pay, even in the international arena.

The newly designated Commissioner for Enlargement, the Slovenian Marta Kos, brings some hope for a change in the role of the European Commission in the region. The conduct of the previous Commissioner, the Hungarian Olivér Várhelyi, was highly detrimental to the region.⁴⁹ Even though, without the introduction of QMV, there will be strong limitations on the work of the new Commissioner, at least we will not see a European Commission working against the interest of enlargement itself.

List of interviewees

1. Adelheid Wölfl, journalist, correspondent South Eastern Europe, Der Standard
2. Giovanni Vale, journalist, correspondent South Eastern Europe, OBCT
3. Florent Marciacq, political analyst, Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe
4. Tomas Miglierina, journalist, former Brussels correspondent, RSI Radiotelevisione svizzera
5. Wouter Zweers, research fellow, EU & Global Affairs Unit, Clingendael
6. Stefano Lusa, journalist, Slovenian Radio Television (RTVSLO)
7. Alejandro Estesó Pérez, Political analyst specialised in the Western Balkans, PhD researcher, University of Graz
8. Francesco Martino, journalist, specialising in South Eastern Europe, OBCT
9. Sebastian Pricop, journalist, Hotnews Romania
10. Aleksander Nikolov, freelance journalist, Dokumentalisti and Den, Bulgaria
11. Ahmed Kaharevic, political analyst, PhD researcher Linköping University

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Endnotes

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