

EUROPEAN UNION ENLARGEMENT QUO VADIS?

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INTRODUCTION

In 2024 the European Union (EU) marked the 20th anniversary of its ‘big bang’ enlargement to include ten new Member States on 1 May 2004. This was the EU’s largest ever enlargement and a historic moment in the process of European integration, heralding the end of the Cold War division of Europe and turning the EU into a genuinely pan-European organization. The process of ‘eastern’ enlargement was completed with the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. Since then, however, and despite rhetorical commitments to admit more members, the EU has enlarged only once – to include Croatia in 2013. It has not admitted a new Member State for the longest period since the then European Communities first enlarged in 1973. Instead, the EU has actually decreased in size, losing the United Kingdom in 2020.

The EU remains formally committed to further enlargement. It currently recognizes nine applicants as ‘candidate states’ and is in accession negotiations with seven of them. In 2020, it adopted a revised enlargement methodology and allocated €14.2 billion to its Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for the 2021–27 period. The European Commission continues to report annually on the progress applicants are making towards their goal of acceding to the EU, and the Council continues to produce annual conclusions on the state of enlargement that the European Council endorses. Nevertheless, no new Member States have been formally identified and no timeframe for the next enlargement(s) has been agreed.

ABSTRACT

The European Union has not enlarged for the longest period in its history since the first enlargement in 1973. In recent years, however, talk of ‘enlargement fatigue’ has been replaced by an emphasis on the geo-strategic importance of enlargement, primarily in response to the Russian invasion of and war in Ukraine. This begs the question of whether at least some of the current nine candidates will accede to the Union in the foreseeable future. While the prospects for enlargement rely on candidates making meaningful progress in meeting the requirements to join the Union, they also require the European Union to agree to enlargement. We consider five key variables to assess the state of play with European Union enlargement: the Union commitment, Member State preferences, supranational activism, integration capacity, and public opinion.

Keywords: enlargement, European Union, geopolitics, public opinion.

RESUMO

O ALARGAMENTO
DA UNIÃO EUROPEIA:
QUO VADIS?



Este tem sido o período mais longo sem qualquer alargamento na história da União Europeia, desde o primeiro alargamento em 1973. No entanto, nos últimos anos, o discurso sobre a «fadiga do alargamento» foi substituído por uma ênfase na importância geoestratégica do mesmo, principalmente em resposta à invasão russa e à guerra na Ucrânia. Isto levanta a questão de saber se pelo menos alguns dos atuais nove candidatos irão aderir à União num futuro previsível. Embora as perspectivas de alargamento dependam de os candidatos fazerem progressos significativos no cumprimento dos critérios de adesão, também exigem que a União aprove o alargamento. Consideramos cinco variáveis-chave para avaliar a situação atual do alargamento da União: o compromisso da União, as preferências dos Estados-Membros, o ativismo supranacional, a capacidade de integração e a opinião pública.

Palavras-chave: alargamento, União Europeia, geopolítica, opinião pública.

In recent years, however, the prospects for the EU expanding beyond the current EU-27 appear to have brightened. This is less a consequence of significantly improved candidate state preparedness, though, and more a reflection of developments on the supply side, i.e., the EU's willingness to admit more states. The key driver has been the war in Ukraine.² For the EU, as the European Council noted in June 2024 in its Strategic Agenda for the EU for 2024–29, the 'new geopolitical reality underscores the importance of enlargement as a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity'. Hence, there is a 'new dynamism in the enlargement process'.³ Pessimistic analyses from the 2010s observing the EU's 'enlargement fatigue',⁴ and contemplating 'the demise of enlargement',⁵ have therefore been replaced by a degree of optimism that the process will before long see the EU once again welcoming in new Member States. While the likelihood of another 'big bang' enlargement similar to 2004 remains remote, the geopolitical importance of enlargement is now regularly asserted by EU leaders. The President of the European Commission,

Ursula von der Leyen, has been among the most outspoken. In September 2022 she declared: 'I want the people of the Western Balkans, of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to know: You are part of our family, your future is in our Union, and our Union is not complete without you!'.⁶ The war in Ukraine has shifted the EU's position on enlargement.

Questions arise as to how substantive this shift is, and whether it will be sustained, actually speed up the process of EU enlargement and result in at least some of the current candidates acceding to the EU in the foreseeable future. Given the multifaceted nature of EU enlargement as a process and the multiple interests and factors at play, providing answers to these questions is far from straightforward. Moreover, much depends on the extent to which the candidates make meaningful progress in meeting the requirements to join the EU. Indeed, the EU has a very technical, conditionality-focused accession process with the emphasis on candidate states demonstrating not just their commitment but more importantly their capacity to fulfil the obligations of membership.

While no two enlargements are the same – each involves different states with their own challenges acceding to an EU that remains an evolving *sui generis* entity – the dynamics of previous enlargements can be instructive. And, as the existing literature on EU enlargement shows, certain considerations have traditionally played key roles in determining whether, when and to whom the EU enlarges. Drawing on these, we have previously

focused on five key variables to assess the state of play with EU enlargement: EU commitment, Member States preferences, supranational activism, integration capacity, and public opinion.⁷ We focus on these variables again here to consider the extent to which the dynamics in the supply side of EU enlargement are shifting such that renewed optimism concerning the future enlargement EU is justified. We consider secondary analyses of EU enlargement, the official positions of the EU institutions and speeches of leading EU officials, as well as polling data.

THE EU COMMITMENT

The obvious starting point for any assessment of the prospects for EU enlargement has to be the current position of the EU and how this has evolved. The position not only conveys the agreed strategic importance of enlargement but also provides a narrative framing for the process. As Schimmelfennig has amply demonstrated through his rhetorical entrapment thesis,⁸ that framing can be used strategically by supporters of enlargement to cajole other less enthusiastic actors in the process into accepting enlargement. The narrative matters and can shift over time in terms of substance and strength, as evident in weaker commitments following the 2004 enlargement and increased caution over establishing timelines and deadlines.⁹

Currently, the EU appears the most strongly committed to enlargement it has been since completing its ‘eastern enlargement’ in 2007. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 and the almost immediate submission of membership applications from Ukraine (28 February 2022), Georgia and Moldova (3 March 2022), EU Member States responded within a matter of weeks by inviting the European Commission on 10 March 2022 to submit its opinion on the applications. These were swiftly produced allowing the European Council on 23–24 June 2022 to grant Moldova and Ukraine candidate status; Georgia was granted candidate status in December 2023. The speed with which the membership applications had been handled was unprecedented. Within a matter of months, Moldova and Ukraine had moved from being eastern ‘neighbours’ to membership candidates. And the momentum did not let up. In

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December 2023, the European Council agreed to open accession negotiations with the two new candidates and the first round of negotiations was held six months later in June 2024.

In amongst these developments the EU early on committed to ‘further strengthen our bonds and deepen our partnership to support Ukraine in pursuing its European path. Ukraine belongs to our European family’.¹⁰ Similar statements were issued regarding Moldova and Georgia. War in Ukraine also impacted on the EU’s willingness to issue

stronger enlargement commitments to the countries of the Western Balkans. At the EU-Western Balkan Summit in Tirana, in December 2022, the EU ‘reconfirm[ed]’ its ‘full and unequivocal commitment to the... membership perspective of the Western Balkans’ (emphasis added);¹¹ a year earlier in Brdo it was just an ‘unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans’.¹² More significantly, in Tirana the European Council called for ‘the acceleration of the accession process’.¹³ Some actions had already been taken. Accession negotiations had finally been opened with North Macedonia and Albania in July 2022. In December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate state, the same day that Kosovo submitted its application for EU membership.

The EU’s revived interest in enlargement found prominent expression in the Grenada Declaration adopted by EU leaders in October 2023. It initiated a process ‘to define the Union’s general political directions and priorities for the years to come’ and ‘a strategic course of action to shape our common future for the benefit of all’.¹⁴ Having reiterated ‘the original promise of the European project to ensure peace, stability and prosperity for our citizens, guided by our values and principles, fundamental rights, democracy, and the rule of law’, the Grenada Declaration established enlargement as ‘a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity’ and made explicit reference to ‘the prospect of a further enlarged Union’ and the need for candidates and the EU to prepare for this. The EU’s Strategic Agenda for 2024–29 adopted by the European Council in June 2024 carried forward the language and, as mentioned, affirmed that there was ‘new dynamism in the enlargement process’.¹⁵ This was followed by the EU’s Brussels Declaration resulting from the EU-Western Balkan Summit in December 2024 reinforcing earlier commitments: ‘The future of the Western Balkans is in our Union. We once again reconfirm our full and unequivocal commitment to the European Union membership perspective of the Western Balkans’.¹⁶

Neither the Grenada Declaration, the Strategic Agenda nor any statement since from the European Council has, however, provided a timeline for further enlargement. It is also striking that no set of accession negotiations is progressing particularly quickly. Montenegro in 2024 announced that it was aiming to become the EU’s 28th member in 2028. In December 2024, chapters in its accession negotiations were closed for the first time since 2017. The three closed brought the total to six; this left 29 to close. Albania meanwhile had opened six chapters and been decoupled from North Macedonia which had still to open any chapters. Serbia had yet to open any more chapters since December 2021 and still had only two chapters closed. Moldova and Ukraine were still to complete the screening process, and there had been no moves to revive negotiations on Türkiye’s accession which remain ‘comatose’.¹⁷

Nevertheless, in turning to enlargement as a key element of its response to the new geopolitical challenges arising from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and in giving enlargement such prominence as part of the EU’s strategic direction, the EU has provided

enlargement with a new and stronger narrative. And this is being used by enlargement's advocates. President of the European Commission, von der Leyen, now invokes 'the call of history'. So,

'[i]n a world where some are trying to pick off countries one by one, we cannot afford to leave our fellow Europeans behind. In a world where size and weight matter, it is clearly in Europe's strategic and security interests to complete our Union. [...] We need to set out a vision for a successful enlargement'.¹⁸

As such, the narrative and commitments around enlargement have shifted.

MEMBER STATE PREFERENCES

Any attempt to understand the dynamics of EU enlargement must consider the views of the EU's Member States. After all, they ultimately decide whether to admit an applicant state. The Council decision requires unanimity and so each Member State has a formal veto. Moreover, each Member State has to complete domestic ratification of any accession treaty. It therefore matters for enlargement not only what the commitment of the EU is, but also whether Member States are championing the process or individual applicant states. Equally important is whether one or more Member States oppose either the process or the accession of a given candidate. Member States tend not to express outright opposition to enlargement, particularly given the established consensus that the EU is not and should not be a closed community. Instead, following Schimmelfennig,¹⁹ they can essentially be regarded as 'brakemen' seeking to slow down the process.

As noted, the agreed European Council position is that enlargement is a 'geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity' and part of the EU's Strategic Agenda for 2024–29. There nevertheless remains a clear tension between the geopolitical case for enlargement and the willingness of Member States to actually proceed with the admission of more states. This is particularly the case, as a matter of principle, where candidates are not meeting the EU's exacting criteria for joining. Conditionality matters. For example, Member States remain divided over opening more negotiating chapters with Serbia. Whereas with Commission support, France, Hungary and Italy were keen to see progress during 2024, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania blocked the process due to Serbia's failure to align with the EU's sanctions policy on Russia. The Netherlands also withheld support for opening new negotiating chapters due to other benchmarks not having been met.²⁰

In other instances, the collective commitment to enlarge does not prevent some Member States from blocking progress in negotiations over bilateral disputes or for essentially only tangentially related reasons for domestic political gain. The obvious example here is Bulgaria and its willingness to block the progress of North Macedonia. Greece

has also threatened to block progress in negotiations with Albania. And, as Bechev has argued, ‘it does not take a huge leap of imagination to anticipate Croatia wielding its veto over Serbia’s or Bosnia and Herzegovina’s accession talks because of issues such as the status of the Croat community in Bosnia’.²¹

On enlargement in principle, 2022 was a pivotal year with Member States actively expressing support for enlargement. As Koval and Vachudova contend, in the period

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since, Member States have adopted more retrenched positions with divisions emerging. Hungary’s opposition towards progressing Ukraine’s application has been particularly evident. Koval and Vachudova also accuse France and Germany of ‘lead-

erlessness’, with France initially championing the European Political Community as a ‘stand-in’ for enlargement.²² Neither France nor Germany is an outspoken champion of enlargement, seeking to drive the process forward. Whether enlargement can proceed without Franco-German leadership remains to be seen. Poland has presented itself as a champion of Ukraine’s accession, but that position has been undermined by its willingness to oppose improved access to the EU market for Ukrainian agricultural products.

SUPRANATIONAL ACTIVISM

While Member States clearly define the EU’s overall position on enlargement, grant applicant states candidate status, decide whether accession negotiations should be opened and closed, and ultimately must agree that a state shall be admitted, the history of enlargement is one involving important agenda-setting, administrative and management roles for the European Commission.²³ Active engagement in support of enlargement from the EU’s supranational institutions can play an important role in advancing the process.

Whereas under Romano Prodi (1999–2004) the European Commission had been a key political force in pushing forward ‘eastern’ enlargement with its first ever dedicated Commissioner (Günther Verheugen) and Directorate-General, subsequent European Commissions have had enlargement lower down on their lists of priorities. The focus has been on consolidating enlargement and the technical implementation of enhanced conditionality rather than on delivering enlargement as a political priority of the EU. On becoming European Commission President in 2014, Jean-Claude Juncker, most notably declared that the EU needed to ‘take a break from enlargement’ ruling out any enlargement during his tenure.²⁴

More recently, during her first term as European Commission President (2019–24), von der Leyen essentially advocated a continuation of the existing position that the future of the Western Balkans ‘lies in the EU’, although there was a recognition that the enlargement process was faltering. Hence, in early 2020 the European Commission proposed ‘enhancing the accession process’ and providing the Western Balkans with

a ‘credible EU Perspective’.²⁵ This led to a restructuring of the accession process with the introduction of the ‘cluster’ model as well as enhanced EU engagement on enlargement with the Western Balkan countries. In Türkiye’s case, however, von der Leyen controversially declared that the country ‘is and will always be an important neighbour’ (emphasis added), failing to acknowledge that candidate status had been granted in 1999 and, although stalled, accession negotiations had been opened.²⁶

Since Russia invaded Ukraine and the applications for EU membership from Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the European Commission has been active in expediting the inclusion of the new applicants in the accession process. It has also been accompanied by a more assertive position on the desire to see the three former ‘Eastern neighbours’ and the countries of the Western Balkans in the EU. In 2022, as already noted, von der Leyen declared: ‘I want the people of the Western Balkans, of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia to know: You are part of our family, your future is in our Union, and our Union is not complete without you!’.²⁷ Two years later, when setting out the political guidelines for a second term as President of the European Commission, von der Leyen declared her belief that ‘it is a moral, political and geostrategic imperative to further complete our Union – in line with the promise we gave in our Treaties’.²⁸ Reflecting, she added: ‘Many doubted the EU’s ability to integrate a large number of Member States in 2004. [...] But the EU rose to the challenge, by preparing internally and by integrating early. Europe will rise to this challenge once again’.²⁹

This more assertive language has been accompanied by the 2024–29 College of Commissioners reverting to a dedicated Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos, rather than continuing with the existing portfolio of ‘Neighbourhood and Enlargement’. Among Kos’ initial statements on enlargement was that Albania and Montenegro could be ready for admission in 2028.³⁰ While this signals the prioritisation of enlargement, it is not being accompanied, however, by any proposed relaxation of the criteria for accession. The focus remains on conditionality, on ‘support[ing] these countries every step of the way on their merits-based process until they are ready to join our Union’.³¹ And if to demonstrate the importance of conditionality, it is notable that Georgia – reflecting concerns on its government’s commitments to the accession criteria – has joined Türkiye in not being on the list of candidates von der Leyen specifically referenced as part of current enlargement priorities.

INTEGRATION CAPACITY

Statements affirming the EU’s commitment to enlarge are rarely ever made without the EU affirming the need to ensure its own readiness to admit more Member States and undertaking internal reforms to prepare for the budgetary, policy- and decision-making consequences of a larger membership. Moreover, there has been a tendency among advocates of European integration to use the prospect of enlargement as a justification to push for deeper integration, the assumption being that enlarging – and therefore

diversifying the membership – requires the *status quo* to be safeguarded and where necessary the foundational work for future projects to be undertaken. The treaties of Amsterdam (1997), Nice (2001) and Lisbon (2009) were all justified, at least in part, as containing reforms necessary for enlargement to proceed. The current debate on enlargement is in principle no different.

In its 2023 Grenada Declaration, the European Council acknowledged that ‘both the EU and future Member States need to be ready’ for enlargement and so ‘the Union needs to lay the necessary internal groundwork and reforms’.³² It committed to ‘set our long-term ambitions and the ways to achieve them [...], address key questions related to our priorities and policies as well as our capacity to act’.³³ Since then in its Strategic Agenda for 2024–29, the European Council committed to ‘undertake the necessary internal reforms to ensure that our policies are fit for the future and financed in a sustainable manner and that the EU institutions continue to function and act effectively’.³⁴ The commitments are also reflected in the position of the European Commission. For von der Leyen, ambitious reform of the EU is ‘indispensable’ for enlargement and ‘an ambitious reform agenda to ensure the proper functioning of a larger Union, to ensure we are equipped to tackle our geopolitical challenges and to improve democratic legitimacy’ is necessary; hence, her call in July 2024 to follow up on the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe (see below), to introduce treaty change ‘where it can improve our Union’ and to ‘use enlargement as a catalyst for progress in terms of our capacity to act, our policies and our spending programmes’.³⁵ The emphasis was on reforming first, and through further integration. Von der Leyen was clear: ‘The EU must widen as it deepens’.³⁶ In terms of practical steps, ‘pre-enlargement’ policy reviews were promised within the first hundred days of the new Commission. Proposals ‘to enhance Europe’s capacity to act, looking at new formats and decision-making processes, including for a larger Union’ were also envisaged.³⁷

How much reform the EU will need to undertake before it feels it is in a position to enlarge is unclear. A number of reports have been drawn up exploring what reforms

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might be required. Prominent among these is the *Sailing on High Seas* paper produced in 2023 by a working group convened by the French and German governments.³⁸ It made recommendations on the size, composition

and organization of some of the main EU institutions, on generalising the use of majority voting in the Council, and on EU competences and resources. It also reflected on the need for treaty reform and for differentiation in the reform process including new opt-outs for Member States unwilling to support reform.

However, despite the acknowledgement of the need for reform, for example in moving away from the need for unanimity in important areas where it is still required, notably foreign policy, it is far from clear that substantive progress towards adopting purport-

edly necessary reforms will be made. In 2023, the then President of the European Council, Charles Michel, noting that a lot of work for enlargement was still to be done, proposed that the EU be ready to enlarge by 2030.³⁹ Few other members of the European Council appeared keen to sign up to the timeline.

The experience with the Conference on the Future of Europe, conceived in 2019 and held in 2021–22 highlighted the reluctance to engage with treaty reform given the difficulties some – possibly many – governments would face in securing domestic support. Its report concluded that most challenges could be addressed within the EU’s existing competences and institutional framework.⁴⁰ Of note though is that its deliberations barely engaged with what reforms would be needed to prepare the EU for further enlargement *per se*.

Assuming reform is pursued, its value for enlargement will depend on whether the focus is on the ultimate size and composition of the EU – and so an enlarged EU accommodating all current candidates and so Ukraine (and potentially Türkiye) – or on admitting states gradually over time as part of a conditionality-determined process. At present, the appetite for reform focused on the former appears limited. Scope for the latter arguably exists, however, given those candidate states most advanced in their accession negotiations have small populations and accommodating a series of small-scale enlargements into the EU as is far from impossible. What matters is the political will.

PUBLIC OPINION

An important consideration in assessing the prospects for reform of the EU and for future enlargement of the EU is public opinion. This reflects the increased salience of public opinion for how Member State governments position themselves on major EU issues. Gone are the days of any ‘permissive consensus’ on EU enlargement.

Voters in the EU have views on whether and to whom the EU should enlarge, and populist political parties in particular have demonstrated an increased willingness to exploit concerns to attract votes. Moreover, and

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generally in response to popular concerns about enlargement, in several Member States the possibility of a referendum being held on future enlargements of the EU has become real. Indeed, in the case of France, a referendum is the default constitutional requirement of the national ratification process for all future accessions to the EU.

Public opinion within the EU towards enlargement is currently supportive. As Bonomi and Rusconi have noted, support for further EU enlargement has reached unprecedented levels in recent years. In mid-2022, Eurobarometer reported that 57% of EU citizens were in favour of EU enlargement; one third (33%) were against. A window of opportunity therefore exists for bold steps to be taken regarding enlargement policy.⁴¹ Given public opinion on enlargement can be quite volatile, the apparent consensus over

enlargement could though be short-lived. The most recent Eurobarometer poll to consider attitudes towards enlargement (Autumn 2024) reported a slight drop in support: 53% of EU voters were in favour.⁴² Support was particularly high – i.e., greater than 60% – in Croatia, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain. Of note, however, is that in Austria, the Czech Republic, France, Germany, and Luxembourg, more than half of voters were opposed to enlargement.

Public opinion is clearly by no means the only determinant of Member State positions on enlargement. Moreover, majority support is not a precondition for progress being made towards enlargement. Indeed, in 1999 when the EU was in the midst of negotiations and decisions on the admission of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Cyprus and Malta, average support for enlargement across the EU-15 stood at 44%. As Buras and Morina note, '[i]f the state of public opinion is an important indicator of the EU's desire to enlarge, the EU looks more ready today than it did 25 years ago'.⁴³ It is striking, however, how high the level of opposition is to enlargement in France and Germany, the EU's two largest and politically most powerful Member States. That enlargement enjoys the support of only just over a third of voters (36%) in France does not bode well for a referendum. Nor does the level of opposition in Austria (59%) where a referendum may be held.

Beyond enlargement *per se*, views differ on support for particular candidates joining the EU. In Germany, voters in 2023 were generally either supportive of or indifferent to the EU admitting most candidate countries; the most obvious exception was Türkiye where two thirds of voters opposed its accession. In Austria too, more voters were either supportive of or indifferent to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia joining the EU than they were opposed. In other polling, Austrian voters were more likely to oppose states joining, including Ukraine (52%) and especially Türkiye (72%).⁴⁴ Such instances of opposition towards enlargement cannot be dismissed as inconsequential exceptions to the general rule that public opinion within the EU is generally supportive of more states joining. Individual Member States can block progress in accession negotiations and the prospect exists of some electorates being asked directly to approve the ratification of accession treaties. One state failing to ratify will prevent that enlargement taking place. Adding to concern here is that the levels of opposition in Austria, France and Germany were high prior to political changes in all three states during 2024–25 that resulted in governments ostensibly more sceptical of the merits of enlargement taking office. The prospect of these governments advocating for enlargement and challenging domestic opposition seems unlikely.

When noting in 2024 'the new dynamism in the enlargement process', the European Council stressed that it had 'a responsibility to make the most of this opportunity and communicate this clearly', presumably not least to voters. A key challenge for the EU in contemplating further enlargement and delivering on its commitments to well-established and more recent candidates is maintaining majority popular support where

it exists and overcoming the opposition that could weaken the hand of key political actors in the process and threaten the prospect of accession treaties being ratified.

CONCLUSION

Enlargement is back on the EU's strategic agenda, driven by geopolitical concerns arising from Russia's invasion of and war in Ukraine. Whether, when and to whom further enlargement will take place remains an open question, however. Multiple factors are at play. Compared with the 2010s, the commitment is much stronger and is informing public statements from EU leaders. Those of President of the European Commission, von der Leyen, have been noted. The new President of the European Council, António Costa, started his term of office with a clear statement that enlargement is 'the best geostrategic investment Europe has made to guarantee freedom and democracy'.⁴⁵

While a strong narrative framing of the essential value of enlargement now exists, it is not clear that the process has a critical mass of powerful champions among the Member States to cajole those with reservations into expediting the process and ensuring that the EU delivers for suitably prepared candidate states. Although, as Schimmelfennig observes, the conditions for rhetorical entrapment are more favourable than they have been for a long time,⁴⁶ this is no guarantee that the EU will either enlarge or include all candidates. While public opinion, in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine, is generally supportive, it also contains pockets of opposition that could easily slow down and potentially even jeopardise enlargement as Member State governments respond more to domestic populist concerns regarding European integration than promote pro-enlargement positions agreed at the EU level. Of note too is that the new narrative of enlargement as a 'geopolitical necessity', does not necessarily extend to all candidates. Türkiye has yet to be included.⁴⁷

While geopolitical and strategic security considerations are once again driving the commitment of the EU to enlarge, it is unlikely that they will actually deliver enlargement. Conditionality matters, and here the preparations of candidates will be of considerable importance. The EU's own internal preparations need to be completed too, and there has been limited evidence of progress to date, raising questions about whether the EU has the capacity to deliver a significant expansion of the EU in the medium-term. A second 'big bang' enlargement is unlikely. Assuming enlargement occurs, it is more likely to involve states joining individually or in groups of two or three. This would be in line with the own-merits approach that the EU insists is the basis for states joining. Also, one or more small states could potentially be admitted without the EU undergoing major reform. This may be the option that is pursued. Doing so would bring an end to the more than a decade-long hiatus in enlargement and bring much needed credibility to the EU in delivering on its new-found rhetoric of enlargement as a geopolitical imperative. 

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