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Summary & recommendations

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A new momentum for the enlargement of the European Union





Summary

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, transatlantic tensions under the second Trump administration and the rise of China are forcing the EU to redefine its role in the world. In a world where power politics based on spheres of influence appears to be gaining dominance, enlargement can strengthen the Union. As a result, since 2022, the issue of EU enlargement has once again been high on the Brussels agenda. There is a sense of urgency. At the same time, enlargement has traditionally been a careful process in which the Copenhagen criteria are central to safeguarding the integrity of the single market and the Union's core values. That is the task: how can enlargement be handled in such a way that it strengthens the Union as a whole – as a common market, a union of values and a security community.

The AIV approaches the issue of EU enlargement in four steps. First, it outlines the current enlargement process, including the supplemental policies that already bind candidate countries more closely to the Union before they obtain formal membership. The AIV then discusses the three main motivations for EU enlargement: 1. Security and stability; 2. Economy and prosperity; and 3. Values and institutions. The AIV concludes that there are opportunities and risks in all three of these areas: EU enlargement is not a self-evident win-win situation.

The AIV then looks back on the 2004–2007 enlargement round, from which it draws five lessons:

- **Security:** EU membership provided a framework for managing conflict, thereby strengthening the Union's internal stability. Without accession, the current security situation in Europe would have been significantly worse.
- **Economy:** Accession brought about the economic and social transformation of the new member states; Poland's per capita GDP now rivals that of the United Kingdom. For current member states, enlargement expanded the single market and thus brought about overall economic prosperity. Disadvantages, such as increased competition and the effects of the free movement of workers, can be mitigated through transitional periods and safeguard clauses.
- **Values and institutions:** Anchoring the rule of law and building stable institutions have proven to be the most intractable challenges of the enlargement process. Backsliding and spoiler behaviour have been observed in several new member states, with Orbán's Hungary as the most notable example. On the other hand, a great deal has been achieved as well, and the older member states are having their own problems protecting the EU's core values. Risks need to be mitigated through accession treaties, but above all they require EU-wide reforms.
- **Mental distance and lack of public support:** Twenty years after enlargement, there are still significant cultural and political differences between East and West. There is also a great deal of scepticism about EU enlargement. A Union whose centre of gravity is shifting eastwards requires a reorientation, particularly for countries such as the Netherlands with a traditionally transatlantic outlook.

- **Reforms and enlargement:** In previous enlargement rounds, enlargement and reform went hand in hand. 'Reform first, then enlarge' is a more attractive approach, but in practice it has not proved necessary. The Single European Act (1986), adopted after the accession of the young southern European democracies, and the Treaty of Lisbon (2009), adopted after the large Eastern European round, illustrate how enlargement actually stimulated reform.

Finally, the AIV describes the situation in Albania, Serbia and Ukraine in order to illustrate the differing accession trajectories. These countries differ greatly in terms of their size, security situation, economic prospects, reform needs and public support for EU membership. The potential impact of their accession on the Union also differs considerably, thereby creating scope for a differentiated approach.

- **Albania**, like Montenegro, is regarded as a frontrunner among the current candidate countries. The country is pro-EU and it is making significant progress with reforms, including judicial reforms. Nevertheless, corruption, organised crime, a lack of democratic pluralism and restrictions on media freedom remain major points of concern. Additional safeguards should be incorporated into the accession treaties. Due to Albania's small size, its accession will have limited consequences for the EU, but it does make the need for progress on the existing EU reform agenda all the more urgent.
- **Serbia** faces a number of fundamental challenges, which have led to a protracted accession process. The current government is pursuing a course of strategic ambivalence between Russia and the West. Serbia is a party to a number of regional conflicts, mostly based on ethnic relations or the legacy of the Balkan war. There are significant concerns when it comes to EU core values, state capture and corruption. Nevertheless, Serbia offers strategic potential for the EU due to its ability to serve as a bridge to the region and its access to strategic raw materials. This is underscored by the growing influence of countries such as China, Türkiye, Russia and the Gulf States.
- **Ukraine** is dominated by the war with Russia. Large swaths of Ukrainian territory are not under the control of the government in Kyiv. Ukraine sees embedding itself in the West as an existential necessity, though NATO membership appears to be out of reach for the time being. Accession has major security implications for the EU: the border with Russia will become longer, and Article 42(7) TEU obliges member states to provide assistance in the event of an armed attack. On the other hand, a Ukrainian defeat or reorientation towards Russia would weaken EU security. As a result of the war, Ukraine faces a substantial reconstruction challenge and necessary democratic and rule of law reforms. Because of its size, economy and security situation, accession will have major consequences for the EU in many areas. At the same time, Ukraine offers valuable contributions in the form of its experienced armed forces, strategic raw materials and the economic opportunities presented by an expansion of the single market.

Conclusion

The AIV concludes that – as with previous enlargement rounds – future enlargement of the Union can help to further anchor democracy, the rule of law, security and prosperity in Europe. As in the past, this will not be without certain costs or risks. However, the AIV concludes that the costs and risks of inaction are higher than those of well considered enlargement. The risks of not acting or acting too late relate to the following areas:

- **Security:** It is no exaggeration to say that the outcome of the war in Ukraine will have a decisive impact on Europe's future. The country has an interest in having a clear prospect of accession. This contributes to the viability of and support for a ceasefire. Even apart from the war, there is a risk that candidate countries will turn away from the EU if EU membership remains uncertain for a protracted period. This creates more scope for other geopolitical players to exert their influence through economic pressure (China), disinformation and hybrid warfare (Russia) and direct interference in political processes (US). This can lead to instability, for example through a rise in nationalism and ethnic conflict in a region with a fraught history.
- **Economy:** Without membership, the investment climate is less stable because EU legislation and the discipline of the single market do not apply. As a result, economic development will lag behind and the stage is set for corruption and the growth of the informal sector. Existing member states miss out on economic opportunities, such as a larger internal market and access to strategic raw materials and energy.
- **Values and institutions:** The EU may lose its appeal as a community of values if the prospect of membership remains uncertain for a protracted period. East-West tensions within the EU may be exacerbated because member states such as Poland feel vulnerable without the prospect of further enlargement. Reforms that candidate countries have implemented so far could be reversed. This would limit the EU's ability to bring about reforms in these countries at the very moment when it should, in fact, be expanded.
- **Reforms and public support:** Enlargement has often acted as a catalyst for reforms in the EU in the past, and it can do so again. This is an urgent task, because public support for the EU may erode further if existing problems are not addressed through reforms.

On this basis, the AIV would offer the following recommendations:



Recommendations

1

Show greater engagement and leadership in the further enlargement of the European Union, in recognition of the fact that enlargement also brings benefits for the Netherlands. The EU's core values in the realm of democracy and the rule of law must be strengthened, not weakened. Enlargement therefore requires both rule of law safeguards in the new member states and reforms in the existing Union.

- Accept that there is no easy win-win situation. Both EU enlargement and non-enlargement entail advantages and disadvantages. However, the costs and risks of a wait-and-see attitude are higher overall. Enlargement gives both the Union and the new member states more scope for action with regard to security, prosperity and institutions.
- Acknowledge that current member states, including the Netherlands, also stand to benefit from EU enlargement. A larger single market offers economic opportunities. New member states' security situation is better after accession. This will in turn enhance the security of current EU member states, including the Netherlands.
- Identify and address the risks associated with this enlargement. Experience shows that the greatest challenge associated with enlargement lies in anchoring the rule of law. Incorporate additional guarantees into 'new generation' accession treaties, but also bolster safeguards for democracy and the rule of law in the current member states by reinforcing the rule of law toolbox and budgetary conditionality. This will help address existing public concerns in the Netherlands about enlargement.
- Aim for phased accession through long transitional periods, for example with respect to the free movement of persons, the budget and the Common Agricultural Policy, in order to mitigate the risks of enlargement.
- Use the momentum to give the Union a stronger foundation through reforms. Deepening and broadening the Union can go hand in hand. Efforts to block reform and enlargement processes often have the same domestic political or geopolitical causes. Reforms are needed even without EU enlargement; EU enlargement increases their urgency.
- Involve European countries that are currently not candidates for membership, such as the UK, Norway and Iceland, more closely in the EU through deeper cooperation and targeted bilateral engagement initiated by the Netherlands. In the longer term, this may lead to (new or renewed) EU membership. This will enhance the EU's capacity for geopolitical action, increases the geographical balance of the Union's enlargement process and can thus foster support for further enlargement.

2

Strive to embed Ukraine in the EU as soon as possible. In cooperation with like-minded countries, the Netherlands should help to achieve a lasting ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine. An EU accession treaty should be negotiated no later than one year after the establishment of a ceasefire.

- This treaty should be predicated on compliance with the joint EU-Ukraine 10-point plan of December 2025, with priority reforms on corruption and the rule of law. Ensure that Ukraine, like all other candidate countries, meets the political Copenhagen criteria. Safeguards against backsliding – including conditionality and the reversibility of rights that have already been acquired – are essential.
- Apply long transitional periods – for example, with regard to agriculture or the free movement of persons – in order to offset the risks of accession. This is the most effective way of shaping phased accession.

- Prior to the conclusion of the accession treaty, allow Ukraine to participate without voting rights in deliberations of the Council and the European Parliament, in line with the recent German proposal. This will strengthen the supplemental policies in preparation for membership and allow for a natural transition into the access that Ukraine will be granted as an acceding member once the accession treaty has been signed.
- Continue to support the reconstruction of Ukraine. The Netherlands has contributed significantly to this so far, and EU membership for Ukraine will provide the EU with more influence over how funds are spent and will attract more private investment due to a more stable investment climate.
- Continue to provide unwavering support to Ukraine in the war, contribute to any security guarantee force and work on the Netherlands' own defence capabilities. The AIV's advisory report on Ukraine, which is scheduled to be published in July 2026, will elaborate on this.
- Explain the difference in treatment given to Ukraine to the other candidate countries by invoking its status as the victim of the largest war of aggression on the European continent since the Union's founding.

2^a

Facilitate Moldova's reform agenda with an emphasis on respecting the rule of law and combating corruption, and strive for the swiftest possible accession once the country meets all the Copenhagen criteria, in line with the current accession process. Encourage the current reform momentum and support for EU accession in Moldova.

3

Facilitate the EU accession of Montenegro and Albania more actively. On the basis of their current ambitious and successful reform efforts, these countries will be ready in the foreseeable future to start negotiations on accession treaties. Ensure that the EU and the Netherlands are ready to pursue these negotiations with vigour.

- Ensure that the accession process gains credibility by admitting these relatively small countries to the Union within a foreseeable time frame. Given their size, their accession will not place excessive demands on the EU's absorption capacity.
- Prepare the Netherlands for negotiations on the next generation of accession treaties, which are expected to be drawn up with these countries. Explore the best design for addressing Dutch concerns, such as better safeguards for the rule of law, media freedom and democracy. Attach a declaration of intent on EU-wide reforms to the accession treaties, setting out a clear timeline.
- Increase knowledge about candidate countries, with a view to fostering public and political debate and support.

4

Show greater ambition and engagement in the EU integration of the Western Balkans. Although EU membership for these countries (apart from Montenegro and Albania) is not realistic in the short term, in the medium term it remains the best way to secure peace, prosperity and EU values for both the Western Balkans and Europe.

- Combine engaged support with strict conditions to pave the way for EU membership. In view of its particular historical responsibility, the Netherlands could focus its attention on Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular. In doing so, it can cooperate with like-minded countries such as Germany.
- Bind these countries more closely to the EU in the pre-membership phase wherever possible, without compromising the integrity of the single market, core EU values or the functioning of the Union. Make full alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy a necessary condition for further steps. Apply the principles of conditionality and reversibility, as laid down in the most recent revision of the accession methodology.
- Strengthen EU conflict-resolution efforts in the region, such as in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

- Work with the Commission and like-minded countries to dissuade EU member states from using bilateral conditions to inappropriately obstruct the enlargement process.
- Modify the Dutch position to avoid vetoes on interim technical steps. Political steps should, however, continue to be decided unanimously.
- Strengthen Dutch engagement by reversing the cuts to the MATRA programme and pre-accession support. Opt for an integrated approach involving all relevant ministries and the private sector.

5

Together with like minded countries, take the initiative for a reform agenda for the Union (see also AIV, 2025). The Commission's failure to present reform proposals related to enlargement – which had been announced for 2025 – is unacceptable. Reforms are necessary for the Union itself, regardless of enlargement. The Union sets high standards for candidate countries to meet the Copenhagen criteria; it must also reform itself. Priority themes are: safeguarding EU core values, security, decision making in the CFSP and the budget.

- Be clear about the opportunities and risks associated with EU enlargement. The mental distance between East and West is still palpable. There is clear scepticism about EU enlargement; existing doubts and reservations must be addressed. The public does not want to be presented with a *fait accompli*.
- As the number of member states rises towards 35 in the post-2030 period, consider ways of accommodating the increasing diversity among member states via different speeds, forms and implementations of membership, with a view to the EU's absorption capacity. Discuss this in the Council.
- Work towards a broadly supported foreign policy, for example through majority voting and a common strategic vision. In the absence of a common line, seek opportunities for cooperation in smaller groups, such as enhanced cooperation (within the EU) or coalitions of the willing (outside the EU), without losing sight of eventual alignment with the EU.
- Step up efforts to safeguard core values by reinforcing the rule of law toolbox. Include in the new generation of accession treaties a declaration of intent with a detailed timetable for EU-wide reforms. Include additional safeguards to prevent backsliding until EU-wide reforms have been implemented.
- Increase the Union's effective deterrent capability and flesh out the mutual assistance obligation under Article 42(7) TEU. There is already a need for this, but this need will become more urgent in relation to enlargement. Involve Ukraine, the country with the most experienced armed forces on the European continent, in strategic decision-making on security, for example in a future European Security Council. Seek alignment among the candidate countries in terms of defence cooperation, as in the case of joint procurement and within the defence industry.
- Use the political and legal toolbox to address sincere cooperation and behaviour that undermines the process.
- Strengthen democratic processes by countering foreign interference and increasing societal resilience. Involve candidate countries in these efforts at the earliest possible stage.
- Ensure a sufficient budget for admitting new member states, addressing strategic challenges and meeting the expectations of EU citizens.
- Reform institutional aspects relating to decision-making, weighted voting, the composition of the College of Commissioners and the distribution of seats in the European Parliament in order to make EU enlargement possible. These issues have direct consequences for the Netherlands' influence on decision-making in Brussels.
- Identify specific opportunities and risks by region and sector. Determine early on which transitional measures the Netherlands needs in order to limit the negative effects of enlargement. Report regularly – also after enlargement has occurred – on the extent to which the risks are materialising and what is being done to reduce negative effects. This is necessary to strengthen public and political support for EU enlargement and cooperation.

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