

A new momentum for enlargement of the Europese Union

Advisory report | 15 June 2026







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Advisory Council on International Affairs

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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.¹
- 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.

2a

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 preaccession 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.

Introduction: a new dynamic

External challenges: geopolitics

In February 2022, just four days after Russian tanks rolled into Ukraine, the European Union received Ukraine's formal application for membership. What would normally mark the beginning of a lengthy, technocratic process took on a deeper emotional and strategic charge this time. President Zelenskyy emphasised not only the need for political and military support but also framed Ukraine's future as being directly bound up with that of the EU: *'Ukraine is fighting for its independence, and our future is in the EU.'*²

The tone within the Union also shifted. Following enlargement rounds in 1973, 1981, 1986, 1995, 2004, 2007 and 2013, there had been a period with little progress in accession processes. In fact, there was movement in the opposite direction: Iceland withdrew its application for candidate status in 2015, and the United Kingdom became the first EU Member State to leave the Union in 2020. Support for further integration had waned, reinforced by crises such as the eurozone crisis, the refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

After the Russian invasion, sentiment around enlargement changed dramatically. Enlargement was suddenly framed as a geopolitical necessity.³ *'Ukraine and the Ukrainians are family'*, wrote then President of the European Council Charles Michel.⁴ *'Ukraine is one of us and we want them in the Union'*, said Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.⁵ Several EU Member States called for Ukraine to be given immediate prospects of EU membership.⁶ On 23 June 2022, Ukraine was officially granted candidate status.

At that point, six countries were already waiting in line to join. In Ukraine's wake, Moldova, Georgia and Kosovo also submitted membership applications in 2022, almost doubling the number of countries in the EU accession queue in that year. After years of stagnation, a new dynamic emerged in a relatively short period.

The Russian invasion was not the only driver of this shift. The international climate is becoming increasingly polarised. Alongside military threats, the EU faces economic and political pressure, particularly from China and Russia. This is accompanied by various forms of hybrid attacks, espionage and influence campaigns.⁷ The traditional ally, the United States, is also seeking a different relationship with the European Union, as set out in the US National Security Strategy of 2025.⁸ President Trump's threatening language towards Greenland in 2026 exposed further cracks in the transatlantic alliance. Conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza and Iran, as well as operations in Venezuela and the Caribbean, are testing the limits of international law, as the United States no longer acts as guardian of the multilateral system established after the Second World War and the legal order that developed from it. The EU, which sees itself first and foremost as a legal order and a community of values, must position itself within this changed world order, in which law and values are under pressure and power appears increasingly to be organised around spheres of influence.

This has also led to a reorientation in European countries outside the EU, such as the UK, Iceland and Norway. These countries are exploring new forms of closer cooperation with the Union. Iceland is holding another referendum later this year on a possible EU membership application. The UK is seeking deeper cooperation through the coalition of the willing for Ukraine and closer economic ties. There also appears to be greater openness to a debate on potential EU membership in Norway.⁹ This is a welcome development that could strengthen the Union, including as a security community, and bring greater geographical balance to enlargement.

Internal challenges: reform requirements and public support

The conditions for a further enlargement of the EU are challenging. In many Member States, democracy is under pressure and governments are working to contain political instability. Key Member States, including Germany and France, are facing the rise of parties opposed to further integration. Cohesion within the Union is under strain as some Member States, such as Hungary, do not adequately uphold core values such as the rule of law and do not always act in accordance with the principle of sincere cooperation towards EU partners. Other challenges, including the EU's competitiveness, also demand political attention and financial resources. As a result, the political space to pursue enlargement appears limited.

The AIV (2025a) identifies a number of areas where the EU itself needs to reform in order to continue to function effectively and decisively, including greater use of qualified majority voting in the CFSP, stronger safeguards for core EU values such as the rule of law, and a broader and more modern budget.¹⁰

The need for reform may increase with enlargement. A larger and more diverse group of Member States increases the likelihood of vetoes in decision-making. A higher number of Member States with lower levels of economic development would, under the current budgetary system based on agricultural and cohesion funds, place greater demands on the EU budget. Admitting countries with less established democratic and rule of law institutions, and with more diverse cultural and historical backgrounds, requires greater effort to uphold core EU values. In short, enlargement requires sufficient absorption capacity to ensure that the Union continues to function effectively after accession. Reforms take time, political will and determination (also see AIV, 2025).

Finally, public support for enlargement among current EU Member States is uncertain. All Member States must ultimately agree to enlargement, and in some, such as France, a referendum may be required. Ratification of enlargement is therefore far from assured. The previous enlargement to include countries in Central and Eastern Europe shows that, even after twenty years, the mental distance between West and East within the European Union remains significant. The conduct of politicians such as the former Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán and Slovak Prime Minister Fico also shapes the debate on further enlargement.

In the international context outlined above, further enlargement of the Union raises an existential question that goes to the heart of European integration as both an end and a means. This question can be answered in different ways. Some authors argue that further enlargement is a form of hubris that could both undermine the cohesion of the Union and bring the Union into further conflict with Russia.¹¹

Others argue that enlargement is the Union's defining success. A community of six countries has grown into one of 27 and may in future expand to 35 or more. The Union has also shown an ability to act in times of crisis. The experience following the accession of ten Central and Eastern European countries after 2004–2007 shows that widening and deepening can go hand in hand. Obstacles in both processes often have the same domestic political or geopolitical causes. Recent elections in Hungary and Bulgaria point to a growing awareness of the importance of combating corruption.

Proponents also argue that the geopolitical gains of expansion outweigh any risks. Seen in that light, a wait-and-see approach towards the candidate countries may contribute to instability. New Member States have contributed to economic dynamism and a larger market, which also strengthens the EU's capacity to act in a world where the Union is more dependent on itself. New Member States contribute to strategic autonomy through access to raw materials, potential

for the energy transition and knowledge and experience in the field of security. For now, most European countries appear to reach this conclusion. In the Granada Declaration (2023), the European Council described enlargement as ‘a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity’.¹²

Request for advice

On 17 April 2025, the AIV received an advisory request from the minister of Foreign Affairs on EU enlargement.¹³ This followed a motion in the House of Representatives (Parliamentary Paper 21 501-02, no. 2997). The minister asked the AIV to examine whether phased or sectoral integration could help to better structure the enlargement process. There is now an extensive menu of options.

A single form of EU membership

For the purposes of defining the scope of this advisory report, it is important to note that only one type of membership is legally possible at present under Article 49 TEU: membership with all rights and obligations. More radical proposals put forward in political or public debate – often under the heading of ‘B-membership’ – would require Treaty amendment. We exclude such B-membership, under which new Member States would, for example, have permanent access to the internal market but would not be allowed to participate in decision-making in the Council, from this analysis.

Although the idea of B-membership has been discussed more than once in the history of the EU, the notion has never gained traction. As early as the 1970s, in preparation for the Tindemans Report of 1975, there was discussion of a core group with voting rights and a subgroup without voting rights.¹⁴ In the 1990s, consideration was also given to offering Central and Eastern European countries associated membership with limited rights. So far, far-reaching forms of differentiation in the design of membership have been considered but have mainly been permitted in order to give countries that were willing and able to take further steps in European integration the scope to do so. Or to give countries that were themselves reluctant to take on all obligations the opportunity to participate as far as possible. The UK in particular always pressed for a ‘special status’, under which it mainly wanted to participate in the area of economic integration. In areas of cooperation in which the UK did not wish to participate, such as the euro or Schengen, the UK was granted an opt-out (see below). As non-Member States, Norway and Iceland were also given the opportunity to participate in the internal market through the European Economic Area (EEA), without being required to take part in other areas of cooperation, such as the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), trade policy or the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

So far, any lasting limitation of membership in the form of an opt-out has always been initiated by the accession country and has not been imposed by the EU. That would be contrary to the principle of equality between Member States under Article 4(2) TEU. This principle prohibits a lasting distinction between EU Member States. Where differences currently exist, for example through Denmark’s opt-out from the euro, this is a choice made by the Member State itself and it is also for that Member State to reverse the opt-out. However, additional conditions and admission requirements may be imposed for participation in forms of closer cooperation such as the eurozone and Schengen.

In addition to the legal objection, there is also a political objection. The introduction of B-membership does not meet the aspiration of candidate countries. They expressly applied for membership of the EU, not of the EEA. It also does not do justice to the prospect of equal membership that has been held out to them. It will therefore lead to resistance in these countries. In response to the recent informal European Council in April 2026, at which a number of forms of pre-membership were discussed, Zelenskyy said: *'Ukraine does not need symbolic membership in the EU [...] Ukraine is defending itself and is definitely defending Europe. And it is not defending Europe symbolically – people are really dying.'*¹⁵ The Finnish President Stubb also urged a different perspective on the relationship with Ukraine: *'Instead of us thinking that Ukraine needs Europe, perhaps we should think that we in Europe need Ukraine more [...] It is the largest, most efficient, and most modern military in Europe [...] We need to seriously start to think how much Europe actually needs Ukraine, whether it's EU membership or, as a matter of fact, NATO membership.'*¹⁶

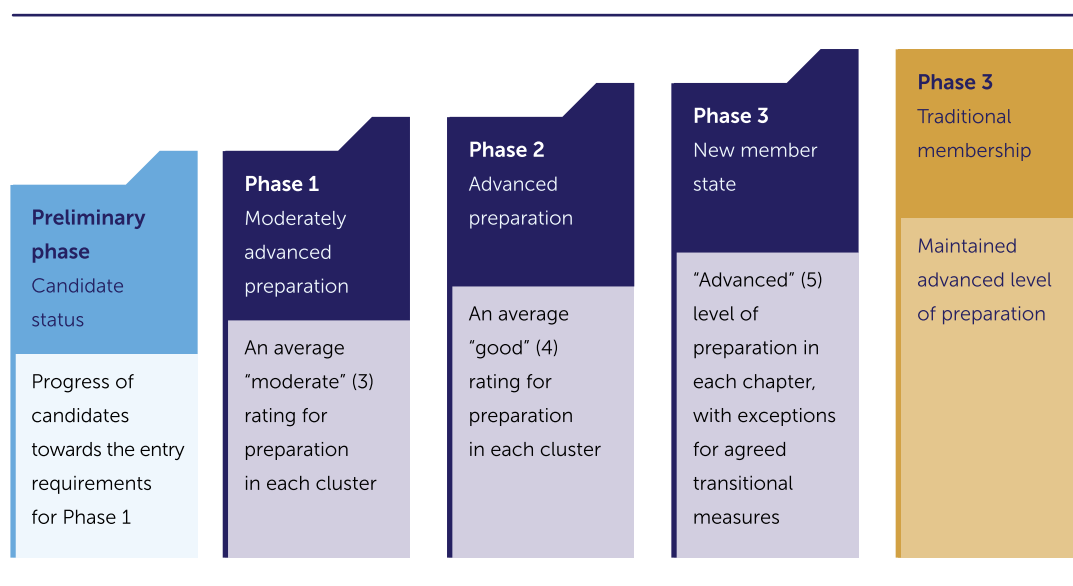
Cooperation requires trust based on equality. Although some candidate countries, such as Albania and Montenegro, have indicated an initial willingness to temporarily relinquish certain rights such as the right of veto, such institutionalised inequality is not sustainable in the long term. If these Member States later claim those rights, the Union cannot prevent this on the basis of the principle of equality.

Phased integration, sectoral integration or reversed integration

Phased or sectoral integration expressly concerns integration aimed at full membership, under which there may temporarily be fewer rights and/or obligations, in accordance with arrangements in the accession treaty.

There are many proposals for phased enlargement in circulation. The best-known proposal for phased integration was launched by the Brussels think tanks CEPS and CEP, in which a candidate country moves in several stages from candidate country to full membership.¹⁷

Figure 1. Phased integration according to CEPS/CEP (2023)



Source: CEPS and CEP (2023) [Template-2.0-for-Staged-Accession-to-the-EU.pdf](#)

The transition to a new phase of membership depends on the progress of reforms. At each stage, the candidate country gains new access to the EU, for example through participation in meetings of EU institutions (Council, the European Parliament and the European Council) and access to EU funds. This process would be reversible: if reforms in a candidate country are reversed, that country may fall back to an earlier membership phase and the accompanying membership privileges.

An alternative approach is gradual or sectoral integration, under which candidate countries, irrespective of progress in the formal negotiations on the 35 chapters, may already adopt EU legislation in certain policy areas and cooperate with EU Member States within EU structures in those areas. Examples include the internal market, environmental policy (Green Deal), the EU digitalisation agenda (Digital Union) and energy policy.

Many proposals in circulation are also currently being discussed at political level, including during the informal European Council in Cyprus in April 2026. These proposals overlap and are not necessarily mutually exclusive:

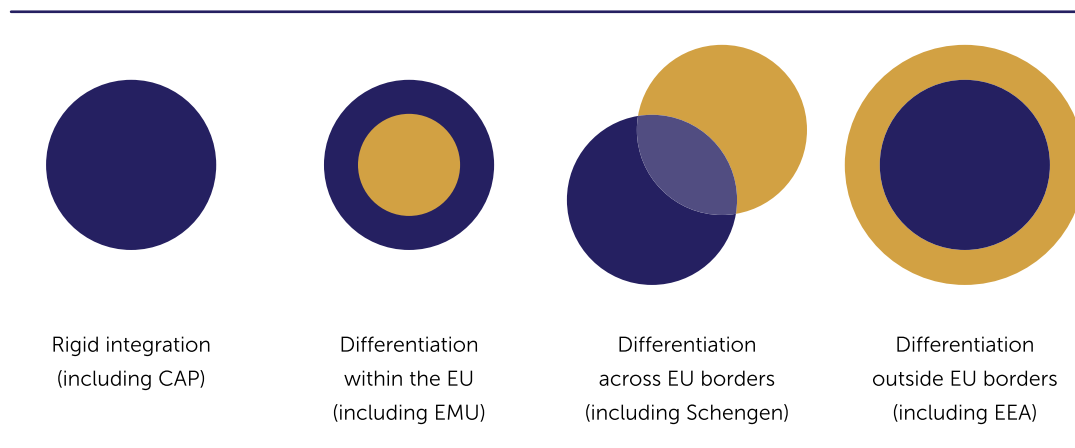
- *Reversed integration/enlargement/membership* or the *fast-track model*, under which a candidate country formally becomes an EU Member State, whether or not with limited rights, and only then has to complete the final reforms. According to media reports, this concept has previously been raised but was rejected by EU Member States.¹⁸
- *Political Accession with Commitments to Transformation*, under which a Member State immediately receives rights in the field of politics and security but only receives rights in other policy areas once all reforms have been completed.¹⁹
- *Associate membership*. According to media reports,²⁰ Germany advocated this during the informal European Council in April 2026. Under this model, Ukraine could participate in meetings of the Council of Ministers or the European Council but would have no voting rights and no access to EU funds or the internal market. Reliance on the mutual assistance clause in Article 42(7) TEU forms part of this proposal, as does a 'snap-back' clause under which rights acquired would be reversed if Ukraine were to roll back reforms.
- *Integrated state status*. Under this model, reportedly advocated by France, access to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and EU funds would be postponed until the country obtains full membership through the usual methodology.²¹
- *Acceding state status*. According to media reports, Lithuania has argued for a model under which Ukraine would be given the status of an acceding state.²² This is the status that a country obtains under the current methodology once the accession treaty has been signed but before the country has acceded. That period is usually used to ratify the accession treaty in all EU Member States and in the acceding country.
- In February 2026, the leaders of Albania and Serbia proposed *accelerated integration* in the form of access to the internal market and the Schengen area, without those countries receiving voting rights or participating in the EU institutions (i.e. no European Commissioner of their own and no Members of the European Parliament).²³ Although this proposal has also not been clearly elaborated, it appears to aim for a temporary position with fewer rights and obligations on the path to full membership.

The key point is that all models assume temporary different treatment in the run-up to full membership with all rights and obligations. They do not involve a different type of membership with permanently fewer rights or obligations. The way in which these models would be given legal form is not entirely clear. This could be done either through association agreements or through a series of political agreements. If the route through association agreements is chosen, ratification by the Member States is likely still required. If the route through political agreements is chosen, there is a political commitment, but the legal status is unclear.²⁴

Other forms of cooperation

Other approaches to European cooperation are also relevant to the discussion on enlargement. In the past, these have also been described under the heading of differentiated cooperation, or as 'variable geometry', 'Europe à la carte' or a 'multi-speed EU'. Kölliker (2006) distinguishes three variants of differentiated cooperation, in addition to 'rigid integration':²⁵

Figure 2. Geographical forms of flexible integration



Source: Kölliker (2006)

Politically, these forms of cooperation are sometimes presented as an 'alternative' to membership, but formally they are not forms of EU membership. As argued above, under the EU Treaty there is only one form of membership, with all rights and obligations. Treaty amendment would be required for a less far-reaching form of 'alternative membership'. No proposals to that effect are in circulation.

Existing practice

The existing practice of enlargement already contains clear elements of phased integration and differentiated cooperation.

Before accession

Before EU membership, candidate countries are brought closer to the Union through supplementary policy, including association agreements, financial support and capacity-building, access to certain policy areas such as the Single European Payment Area (SEPA), 'roam like at home' or participation in the Energy Union. This runs in parallel with the formal accession process, which is explained further in Chapter 1.

Upon accession²⁶

As part of accession treaties, it may be agreed that certain parts of the *acquis* will be phased in. In previous accession rounds, for example, there were transitional periods before the free movement of persons was fully introduced or before countries participated fully in EU funds. These restrictions are temporary. They may take effect immediately upon membership or, in the case of safeguard measures, may be invoked and take effect when certain conditions are met. The Commission plays an important role in overseeing the proper application of transitional periods.

A relatively far-reaching form of transitional period is the derogation from participating in the eurozone. Several Member States, including the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and Sweden, were granted a derogation from participating in the eurozone upon accession.²⁷ Unlike Denmark's opt-out, this is not a permanent exception; in due course, they are expected to join. Bulgaria did so on 1 January 2026. However, additional conditions apply, which they must meet separately from the conditions for EU membership. This therefore requires further decision-making. The ECB monitors progress and reports on this to the Council.²⁸

Another form of flexible integration is participation in the Schengen Agreement. All new Member States must also participate in this in due course. To do so, they must meet separate requirements under the Schengen Agreement, in addition to the requirements for EU membership. That requires further decision-making. It is therefore possible that a new Member State may only join Schengen after some time. In addition to EU Member States, non-EU Member States such as Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Switzerland also participate in the Schengen Agreement. It is therefore also a form of differentiated cooperation as shown in Figure 2. Schengen is part of the EU *acquis*. For now, not all EU Member States are also members of the Schengen area. Ireland has an opt-out, and Cyprus is still in the process of accession because it does not yet meet all the additional requirements. Cyprus is expected to join in 2026.

Upon membership, all new Member States also automatically become members of the European Economic Area (EEA) and are bound by other agreements with third countries or international organisations that are binding on the EU and its Member States.

After accession

Once a country is a member of the Union, there are still various ways to structure differentiated cooperation:

- **Enhanced cooperation:** Article 20 TEU in conjunction with Articles 326–334 TFEU allow more ambitious EU Member States to cooperate more closely within EU frameworks and to make more far-reaching arrangements.²⁹ This is a form of differentiated integration within the EU. Enhanced cooperation is also possible outside the context of enlargement. The loan provided to Ukraine by 24 Member States for 2026–2027 is an example of enhanced cooperation within the EU.³⁰ However, enhanced cooperation is subject to several conditions: for example, at least nine Member States must participate. Enhanced cooperation is then open to all Member States at the time it enters into force. Joining the enhanced cooperation at a later date is also possible for all Member States, provided that the earlier decisions of the cooperating countries are respected.
- **Coalition of the willing:** forms of more far-reaching cooperation also exist outside the EU, such as in the coalition of the willing for Ukraine. Some EU Member States may participate in this outside the EU framework and cooperate with non-EU Member States.
- **Opt-out:** when the EU takes a further step in cooperation and formalises this in the Treaties, a Member State may decide not to participate. For example, when the Economic and Monetary Union was enshrined in the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), Denmark decided not to participate. The country obtained what is known as an opt-out. In principle, an opt-out can only be obtained when new competences are transferred to the Union through Treaty amendment. Accession countries are expected to adopt the entire EU framework. In principle, they therefore always become members of the eurozone and cannot obtain an opt-out. However, additional conditions apply to membership of the eurozone, as well as the Schengen area.
- **Derogation:** a derogation is also possible outside the context of enlargement, for example a derogation on the standard rules regarding the spreading of nitrogen from animal manure on agricultural land. A country is then permitted not to apply EU legislation in defined areas, or to apply it differently. The Member State must submit a request to this effect. The European Commission oversees the correct application of the derogation.
- **Other forums for European cooperation:** finally, there are other forums for cooperation and coordination in which EU Member States can participate. The European Political Community (EPC), for example, was established to facilitate high-level strategic political discussions on European cooperation. All 27 EU Member States and ten candidate countries participate in it.

Conclusion

The EU's existing practice shows that there are various ways to structure phasing properly, for example through intensive cooperation with candidate countries before accession, through longer transitional periods and safeguard measures in accession treaties, and, after accession, by using enhanced cooperation to give scope to Member States that wish to take further steps.

Phasing cannot lead to membership with permanently fewer rights and obligations. Under the current Treaty, this is not legally possible because it would conflict with the principle of equality.³¹ Treaty amendment would require a lengthy and large-scale process, involving an intergovernmental conference and ending with ratification by each individual Member State. At present, there is insufficient support among the Member States for such a process.³² Similar proposals to create B-membership have so far always failed in the past.

Finally, membership with fewer rights does not reflect the ambition that candidate countries have in pursuing EU membership. When he submitted Ukraine's application, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called not only for EU membership, but for membership on equal terms: *'Our goal is to be with all Europeans and, most importantly, to be equal. [...] I am confident that it is fair. I am confident that we deserve it.'*³³

The AIV views phasing in the accession process and in closer integration positively. It distinguishes three steps in this process:

1. Before accession, candidate countries should be involved as much as possible in EU cooperation in return for reforms that they implement in the run-up to membership. In Ukraine's case, given the country's exceptional situation as the victim of a war of aggression, the AIV sees scope for further access, including participation in deliberations in the Council and in the European Parliament, as proposed by certain Member States such as Germany during the informal European Council in April 2026.
2. In the context of the accession treaty, phasing may be structured through temporary derogations, safeguard clauses and transitional periods. This phasing may be long-term but cannot be applied on a permanent basis.
3. After membership, phasing may be structured as enhanced cooperation within the EU or through coalitions of the willing outside the EU. As laid down in the Treaties, access to enhanced cooperation must always remain open to other Member States that are not initially willing or able to participate in this closer cooperation. The AIV also sees advantages in this form of phasing in the context of reforming the existing EU, for example in relation to closer cooperation in the CFSP.³⁴

Interpretation of the request for advice

In light of the above, the AIV considers it important to analyse EU enlargement comprehensively and has therefore chosen a request for advice that is broader than phased or sectoral integration:

1. What forms of enlargement exist? Which forms offer prospects to candidate countries and encourage the reform process?
2. Which specific Dutch and EU interests are served by enlargement, and which may be adversely affected?

3. How can any adverse effects be addressed, for example by setting preconditions and implementing mitigating measures?
4. What options are there for engaging constructively with EU enlargement, without undermining the Netherlands' merit-based enlargement policy, in which core EU values are central?

Overview

To answer these questions, Chapter 1 examines the enlargement process and the underlying drivers of EU enlargement. Chapter 2 reviews the 2004–2007 EU enlargement round. Where do these countries stand today and what lessons can be drawn from this 'big bang' enlargement? The AIV then analyses three candidate countries: Serbia and Albania from the Western Balkans (Chapter 3) and Ukraine (Chapter 4), identifying a number of specific obstacles. Chapter 5 sets out courses of action to maximise the potential benefits of enlargement while mitigating its drawbacks, including different models of enlargement and phasing. The report concludes with the AIV's recommendations.



The how and why of EU enlargement

1.1 The practice of enlargement

Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands established the European Economic Community (EEC) on 25 March 1957. European cooperation – first within the EEC and later within the EC and the EU – has seen seven rounds of enlargement. One country has left the Union (the UK, 2020). The following countries have acceded:

Table 1. EU enlargement rounds

Round	Date	Acceding countries
I	1 January 1973	Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom
II	1 January 1981	Greece
III	1 January 1986	Spain and Portugal
IV	1 January 1995	Austria, Finland and Sweden
V	1 May 2004	Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia
VI	1 May 2007	Bulgaria and Romania
VII	1 July 2013	Croatia

The EU has currently received applications for membership from Turkey, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Kosovo. As accession talks with Georgia and Turkey have actually been put on hold, these countries are not included in this advisory report.³⁵

Conditions for accession

The Treaty on European Union (TEU) provides that any European country that respects and is committed to the Union's core values, as set out in Article 2 TEU, may apply for EU membership (Article 49 TEU). The accession requirements are fleshed out in the Copenhagen criteria, which every candidate country must meet.

Copenhagen criteria

Political criteria:

1. The acceding country must have stable institutions.
2. Respect for democratic principles.
3. Safeguarding human rights and respect for minorities.

Economic criterion:

4. The acceding country must have a functioning market economy capable of withstanding the competition of the internal market.

Administrative and institutional criterion:

5. The acceding country must be able to assume the obligations of EU membership, including the capacity to adopt and implement the EU acquis, and to subscribe to the objectives of the political, economic and monetary union.

In addition to the criteria that candidate countries must fulfil (the Copenhagen criteria) consideration must also be given to whether the EU itself has sufficient capacity to continue to function effectively after enlargement. This is referred to as the Union's absorption capacity. This concept has not been defined in detail. Unlike the Copenhagen criteria, the European Commission does not assess EU absorption capacity annually against objective benchmarks during the accession process. Rather, it is for the Council to consider it and, where necessary, to take measures to strengthen absorption capacity. This creates a risk that it may be used as a catch-all argument against EU enlargement. One attempt at framing the concept is set out in Emerson *et al.* (2006) and reproduced in the box below.³⁶ The AIV identifies the measures and adjustments needed to accommodate new Member States in the following areas: 1) values; 2) policy; 3) budget; 4) governance; and 5) public support.

Absorption capacity

Emerson *et al.* (2006) identify the following elements of absorption capacity:

1. The capacity of the market for goods and services to integrate Member States
2. The capacity of the labour market to integrate new Member States
3. The capacity of the EU budget to absorb new Member States
4. The capacity of the EU institutions to function with new Member States
5. The capacity of society to integrate new Member States
6. The capacity of the Union to ensure its strategic security

The accession process on paper

The accession process is a technical procedure with numerous procedural steps and decision points.³⁷ We list a number of important steps here. The process is characterised by numerous decision points in negotiations between the EU and candidate countries, at which the Council decides unanimously whether the process can move to the next phase. The Council, and therefore each individual Member State, has significant influence over the pace of progress.

The accession process starts when a country formally submits an application to the Council. On the basis of an assessment by the Commission, the Council decides unanimously whether to grant candidate country status. After a pre-accession strategy has been drawn up between the candidate country and the Commission, the Council again decides unanimously whether to start accession negotiations.

The accession process is divided into 35 chapters (policy areas), grouped into six clusters. The Council decides unanimously whether to open clusters. The first cluster occupies a central position. This 'Fundamentals' cluster covers the chapters on the judiciary and fundamental rights; justice, freedom and security; public procurement; statistics; and financial supervision. It is opened first and closed last. Each year, the Commission reports to the Council and the European Parliament on progress in the accession process.

If the accession process is successfully concluded, an accession treaty is drawn up. Consideration is then given to whether the Union has sufficient absorption capacity. The accession treaty must be approved by both the European Parliament (by absolute majority) and the Council (by unanimity). It is then signed and ratified by both the candidate country and all existing Member States in accordance with their national constitutional provisions. Once all contracting parties have ratified the treaty, the candidate country formally becomes a Member State of the EU on the agreed date.

On paper, the process appears to follow a linear path from application to actual membership. In practice, however, it is more complex: not every application for membership actually leads to membership. Neither does accession follow a fixed timetable. Progress depends on the extent of reforms required and on the capacity and political will to implement them. Sweden's accession process took 3.5 years, Austria's 5.5 years, Ireland's just under 7 years, Estonia's 8.5 years and Bulgaria's 12 years. The duration of the individual accession phases also varies: Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate status within months, while this took 12 years for Turkey and 5 years for Albania.

Table 2 shows the current status of the accession process for all countries that have presently applied for EU membership.

Table 2. Status of accession process by candidate country

Country	Membership application	Candidate status granted	Start of negotiations	Progress of negotiations
Albania	24 April 2009	27 June 2014	19 July 2022	All 6 clusters open
Bosnia and Herzegovina	15 February 2016	December 2019	2024 Negotiating framework not yet agreed	
Georgia	3 March 2022	14 December 2023		Suspended since 2024
Kosovo	15 December 2022	Ongoing		
Moldova	3 March 2022	23 June 2022	25 June 2024	Cluster 1 not yet opened
Montenegro	15 December 2008	17 December 2010	29 June 2012	All 6 clusters open 7 chapters closed
North Macedonia	22 March 2004	16 December 2005	19 July 2020	Cluster 1 not yet opened
Ukraine	28 February 2022	23 June 2022	25 June 2024	Cluster 1 not yet opened
Serbia	22 December 2009	1 March 2012	25 March 2015	22 chapters opened 2 chapters closed
Turkey	14 April 1987	12 December 1999	3 October 2005	Suspended since 2018

Source: *Factsheet: State of play - EU accession negotiations - Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood*

Additional policy

In parallel with the formal negotiations on the Copenhagen criteria, the EU is pursuing additional policies to support candidate countries and bring them closer to the Union:³⁸

- Through free trade agreements or Stabilisation and Association Agreements, countries are granted tariff-free access to the EU market for almost all goods. These agreements often also include provisions on the free movement of workers, services and capital.
- Countries receive financial support and capacity-building to be able to carry out the reforms required for accession, including through growth plans, the pre-accession programme and the Ukraine Facility.³⁹ Under the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, candidate countries Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are working towards a common regional market. This provides a framework comparable to the EU internal market, with free movement of goods, services, persons and capital. It helps these countries to become familiar with how the internal market of the EU operates and to become more closely connected to one another in preparation for EU membership.
- The countries receive access to the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), which facilitates payments with the EU. In return, they must adopt financial regulation, including in areas such as anti-money laundering.
- Roaming charges for mobile phones have been abolished for almost all countries.
- The countries take part in, or seek to join, the Energy Union.⁴⁰ This is cooperation between the EU and a number of non-EU countries, aimed at extending the EU's internal energy market. A number of candidate countries are also already connected to the European electricity grid (ENTSO-E).
- Most countries benefit from visa-free travel to the EU and cooperate with the EU Member States to manage migration flows to the EU.
- A number of candidate countries participate in Erasmus+ as associated third countries and may take part fully, for example, in student and teaching staff exchanges.
- All candidate countries and potential candidate countries may participate in Horizon Europe research programmes, whether or not subject to conditions.
- Potential candidate countries and candidate countries may participate in joint defence procurement under SAFE. However, they are not eligible for EU loans under the SAFE programme.
- A number of candidate countries have the right under the association agreements to limited participation in the EU Space Programme. Ukraine is the only candidate country with full access.
- A number of candidate countries have limited access to the Digital Europe programme.

A distinguishing feature of this additional policy is that the Commission takes the lead, in contrast to the accession negotiations, where the Council directs the process.

1.2 Drivers of enlargement

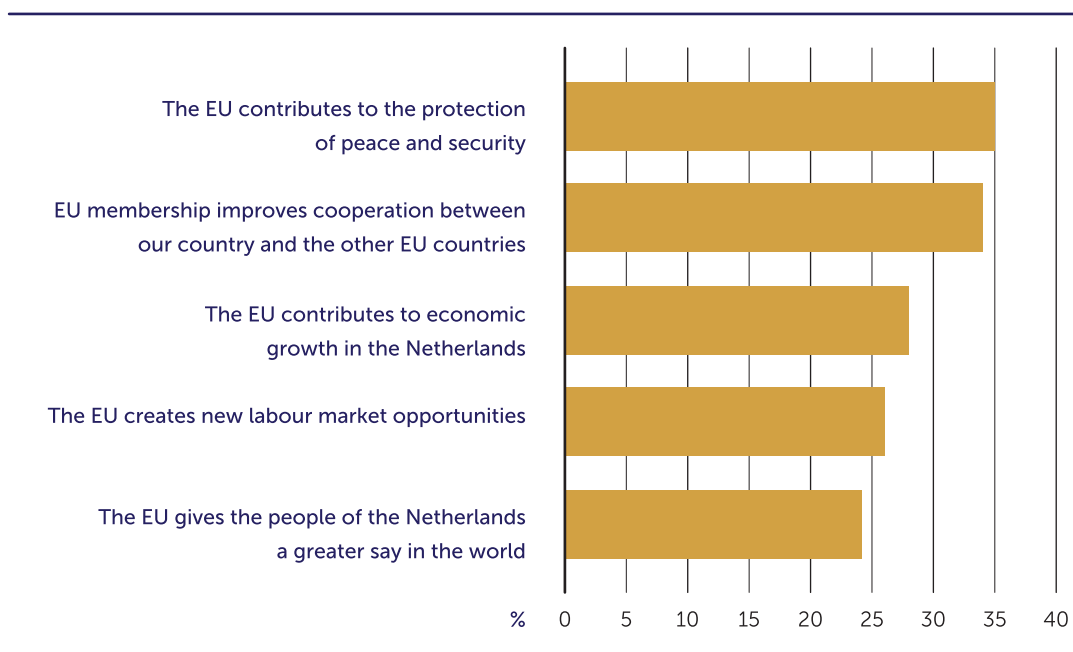
The three main drivers of EU enlargement are outlined below: (1) security and stability, (2) broad prosperity, and (3) the advancement of institutions and European values.⁴¹ The literature also identifies other, largely derivative, drivers, such as energy security and migration management. An important caveat is that existing and acceding Member States may have different motivations. They may also attach different weight to those motivations.

Security and stability

The EU accounts for around six per cent of the world's population and approximately one-third of global trade. This gives the EU greater political, economic and military clout to defend the interests of its citizens than its Member States can exercise individually. For EU citizens, peace, security and international cooperation are key benefits of membership (Figure 3).

The EU includes an explicit security guarantee in Article 42(7) TEU: where a Member State is the victim of armed aggression, the other Member States are obliged to provide aid and assistance by all means in their power. There are also other forms of mutual assistance, such as consular protection (Article 20(2)(c) TFEU) and the Anti-Coercion Instrument, which allows the EU to respond collectively to economic pressure from third countries.⁴² EU enlargement expands the alliance and brings additional resources.

Figure 3. Main reasons why a country has benefited from EU membership



Source: [Eurobarometer Jan/Feb 2025](#)

At the same time, enlargement entails risks for security and stability. Some candidate countries face internal or external conflicts or are involved in active war. The EU risks being drawn into these conflicts. Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, maintains a fragile balance between three ethnic groups: Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs. Following the war and genocide of 1995, the Dayton Accords divided the country into two administrative entities. The current president of the Serbian part (Republika Srpska), Milorad Dodik, has repeatedly threatened to establish an autonomous Serbian state, which undermines the country's stability. The EU seeks to prevent escalation and monitor the security situation through the EU operation EUFOR Althea.

EU accession can, however, also help to stabilise internal and regional tensions. One example is the situation of Hungarian minorities in Romania after 1989. Hungary's first prime minister after the end of communism in 1989, József Antall, repeatedly emphasised that he was prime minister of '10 million Hungarians in the legal sense, but the prime minister of all 15 million Hungarians in the spiritual sense'. Without the prospect of EU membership, this might have led to serious conflict.

Another risk is that enlargement may affect the EU's capacity to act in the field of security. National interests of Member States on the global stage can diverge, particularly in a larger and more diverse Union. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many Member States found it difficult, for example, to reduce their dependence on Russian gas in the short term, which complicated a unified EU response. Hungary delayed decisions on sanctions against Russia and on Ukraine's EU accession, citing national considerations. As the number and diversity of Member States increase, so does the likelihood that national vetoes will obstruct European decision-making, especially in areas requiring unanimity, such as the Multiannual Financial Framework and the CFSP. For enlargement to contribute positively to stability and security, the Union must remain able to bridge differences and act decisively and in a unified manner.

Economy and broad prosperity

Access to the internal market and the free movement of goods and services reduces trade costs, which, according to CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (2022), increases GDP in almost all EU Member States (except Finland).⁴³ Economic integration also raises productivity through more efficient allocation of resources and increased competition. Exporters gain access to new markets, investors find new investment opportunities, and consumers benefit from a wider range of goods and services. Integration also contributes to broader prosperity, for example through more effective responses to cross-border challenges such as climate change, the environment and migration, and through cultural exchange.

These benefits are not evenly distributed. The Netherlands benefits relatively strongly, with GDP being 3.1 per cent higher as a result of enlargement. More recent entrants benefit more than older Member States such as Italy and Greece. Countries outside the Union tend to lose out due to shifts in trade flows. Significant redistribution effects can also occur within EU Member States: between different population groups, regions and sectors. Some sectors or regions need to adjust to new competitive conditions and may face serious temporary disruption as a result. This is reflected in levels of support for EU membership: 65 per cent of highly educated respondents support membership, compared with 45 per cent of those with lower levels of education (see Table 3).

Table 3. Support for EU membership by population group

EU27	In favour	Against	No opinion
Education (end of)			
15-	45	42	13
16-19	53	41	6
20+	57	37	5
Still studying	65	26	9

Source: [Eurobarometer Standard STD103_Spring 2025_Citizenship_en.pdf](#)

These dynamics can create tensions. Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Lithuania temporarily closed their borders to Ukrainian agricultural products. Although EU measures temporarily allowed tariff-free transit of Ukrainian grain to address shortages in third countries caused by the war, weak enforcement meant that some of the grain entered local markets, including in Poland. This undermined local producers and led to protests in the agricultural and transport sectors.

In the Netherlands, concerns are often raised about the adverse effects of labour migration, such as downward pressure on wages and competition for local tradespeople such as plumbers, contractors and painters. The Roemer Report (2020) warned that underpayment and regulatory evasion by employers or housing providers undermine the social system and encourage a race to the bottom. Companies that comply with the rules are also affected by unfair competition.⁴⁴ The European Commission emphasises that migrants experience poverty and social exclusion more often.⁴⁵ Yet labour migration also offers solutions, such as addressing shortages of skilled workers and seasonal labourers.

Accession countries also experience problems, such as brain drain, accelerated ageing or the acquisition of productive assets such as factories and raw materials. These problems arise from asymmetries in economic development. Although this creates opportunities, including higher wages for migrant workers and investment prospects for companies, it also brings risks. Given the economic development of some candidate countries, these asymmetries are likely to increase in the short term after accession. Given the size of some candidate countries, such as Ukraine, the effects will also be felt in current Member States.

Finally, EU legislation that ensures free movement and a level playing field reduces the scope for national policy-making. Member States are bound by rules such as limits on state aid, the absence of an independent exchange rate policy within the euro area, and constraints in areas such as nitrogen policy and pulse fishing in the Netherlands.

Institutions and values

Growing fragmentation of the global order (The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), 2024) and increasing systemic competition have put EU enlargement high on the agenda. In part due to the rise of China, the authoritarian model has also become a realistic alternative for many countries to pursue, alongside the Western liberal model. The increasing emancipation of the Global South, led by the BRICS, shows that countries no longer want the Western model imposed on them, but seek and assert the right to choose their own path. In the United States, traditional values such as democracy, freedom of expression and a rules-based international order are also under pressure from populism and polarisation. There is a risk that the EU, together with like-minded countries such as Japan, Canada and Australia, could become one of the last bastions of the liberal model of democracy and the rule of law.

Within the EU, core values such as democracy and the rule of law are also under strain. While this also applies in long-standing Member States such as Italy and the Netherlands, there is particular concern about autocratic tendencies in countries that joined more recently, including Hungary, Slovakia and, to a lesser extent, Poland. A key issue is that respect for EU law and core values forms part of the accession criteria. Before accession, existing Member States can exert significant influence through vetoes in the accession negotiations. After accession, the scope for individual action is more limited. When Poland and Hungary showed serious shortcomings in safeguarding the rule of law, the EU was found to lack sufficient instruments to call these Member States to account after accession. The Union's rule of law toolbox was strengthened significantly from

2015 to 2025, including through the rule of law dialogue, monitoring and budget conditionality. However, these instruments do not yet function optimally (also see AIV (2025a)).⁴⁶ This weak enforcement undermines the credibility of the EU model and gives rise to doubts about further enlargement to countries in which democratic and rule of law institutions are not yet firmly entrenched. Many candidate countries currently fall into this category.

In addition to the various forms of enforcement of EU core values, enlargement will also increase diversity in other respects. Views on ethical issues – such as euthanasia, homosexuality and abortion – and on policy areas such as climate, migration and foreign policy vary widely. Public trust in the state or the judiciary also differ between Member States. The Union seeks to be a community that accommodates a considerable degree of diversity, but a shared legal culture does place limits on that diversity. Enforcing those limits is complex: public support for the EU may decline if norms – for example on discrimination – are imposed, or if the EU interferes too extensively in national institutions and policy.

The central question for the EU is how to strike a balance between a clear common foundation of shared norms and values – safeguarded through the Copenhagen criteria and the rule of law toolbox – and respect for diversity and social and cultural ties. This balance is essential to prevent social tensions and a loss of public support for the EU.

Widening or deepening?

In every round of enlargement, there has been discussion about the tension between widening (cooperation with more Member States in a limited number of areas) and deepening of the Union (further integration and cooperation). Opponents of deepening sometimes point to the increasing diversity resulting from widening as an argument in favour of EU enlargement. It was no secret that former British PM Thatcher supported enlargement, precisely because she believed that a larger Union would be less likely to develop beyond a free trade area. The larger and more diverse the Union, the stronger the incentive to limit the scope of cooperation so that it remains workable. This can also be seen in Dutch policy in the 1960s and 1970s. From a Dutch perspective, enlargement to include the UK also served as a counterweight to the Franco-German axis and to the push for deeper cooperation.

However, enlargement often led to deepening: the Single European Act (SEA) transformed the EU from an economic to a political-economic union after the accession of Portugal, Spain and Greece, with more powers, a stronger European Parliament and cooperation in foreign policy. The Treaty of Lisbon (2009) was also a response to the enlargements of 2004 and 2007.

Deeper cooperation makes the accession process more complex. With each additional policy area brought within the scope of EU cooperation, the body of law that candidate countries must adopt before they can become members of the Union increases. Because these countries must bear the costs of implementing EU law before fully receiving the benefits of accession, this can undermine political support for accession in candidate countries.

Interaction and trade-offs between drivers

The three drivers identified above can reinforce one another. A strong and stable rule of law (driver 3), for example, contributes to a favourable investment climate and thus to economic prosperity (driver 2). Where this leads to a broader tax base, it gives governments the option of investing more public funds in defence (driver 1).

At times, however – particularly in the short term – trade-offs between objectives are required. The EU, for example, faced significant criticism for what was perceived as a lack of support for the protest movement in Serbia. It was accused of prioritising stability and good relations with the Serbian government over the need for reforms in areas such as anti-corruption, the rule of law and democratic pluralism. In the summer of 2025, the Ukrainian government presented the EU with a similar dilemma by reversing the independence of the country's anti-corruption body. The Union took a different approach from that taken in Serbia. Following protests among the Ukrainian population and pressure from the European Commission, the government reversed its decision.

1.3 Conclusion

This chapter shows that EU enlargement is a complex undertaking. While the main drivers of enlargement and accession – security, prosperity and values – are clear, they may differ from one country to another and may be weighted differently. All three areas also involve risks of adverse effects. The enlargement procedure is relatively fixed on paper, but in practice it is already tailored to individual candidate countries. Each has a different starting point in terms of its economy, security and institutions, a different reform agenda, a different need for technical and financial support, and a different level of public support for accession. This advisory report considers whether greater differentiation of the process is useful, necessary and required to manage the planned accession of the current candidate countries. The next chapter therefore looks back at the previous major enlargement round of 2004–2007, with a view to drawing lessons for the future.

The previous major enlargement: lessons

2.1 Introduction

The EU enlargement round of 2004–2007, often referred to as the ‘big bang’ enlargement, provides a relevant point of reference for the current enlargement processes. First, it was the largest enlargement of the EU to date, both in terms of population (approximately 124 million) and in terms of the number of accession countries (12). By comparison, if all current EU candidate countries and potential candidate countries considered in this advisory report (excluding Turkey and Georgia) were to accede, this would add eight Member States and approximately 50–60 million people to the Union, two-thirds of whom would be from Ukraine. Second, like the current enlargement round, the ‘big bang’ enlargement took place in a rapidly changing geopolitical context following the fall of the Berlin Wall.

This chapter analyses developments in the enlargement countries after the ‘big bang’ in the areas of (i) security, (ii) the economy and (iii) institutions and values. It then discusses a number of themes that featured in public and political debate and seeks to draw lessons from this enlargement. An important caveat is that there is no counterfactual, and that other factors, such as the financial crisis of 2008, also influenced economic and political developments. The effect of enlargement cannot therefore be clearly isolated.

2.2 Review

Security and stability

For the EU Member States at the time, security and stability were important reasons to support the ‘big bang’ enlargement. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, there was a shared sense of urgency to bring East and West together and to address the legacy of the Second World War. At the same time, Europe sought to involve Russia more closely in the European security architecture, including through membership of the Council of Europe (1996) and an agreement between Russia and NATO in 1997 aimed at closer cooperation within a dedicated NATO–Russia Council.

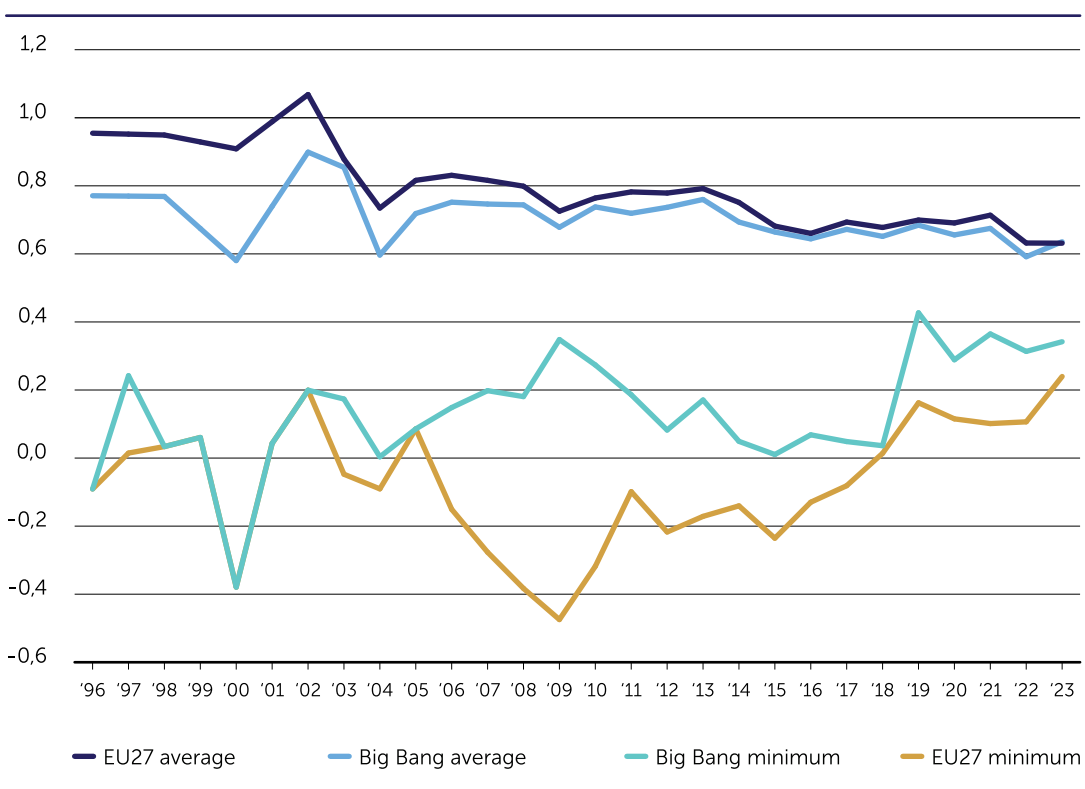
The candidate countries were already seeking closer ties before EU membership. Table 4 shows that, before or at the same time as joining the EU, these countries also joined international security alliances, such as the OSCE and NATO.⁴⁷ With the accession of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Union’s security was strengthened. NATO gained greater strategic depth. However, a direct border with Russia emerged in the Baltic region (and later also Finland), which introduced new vulnerabilities. The armed forces of the new allies had to adapt in fundamental ways, but the security situation in Europe appeared to allow sufficient time for this. The new Member States quickly took part in crisis management operations, such as ISAF in Afghanistan, and contributed to security and defence policy.

Table 4. Membership of alliances and cooperative frameworks

Country	OSCE membership	NATO membership	EU membership
Bulgaria	1973	2004	2007
Hungary	1973	1999	2004
Czech Republic	1993	1999	2004
Estonia	1991	2004	2004
Latvia	1991	2004	2004
Lithuania	1991	2004	2004
Poland	1973	1999	2004
Romania	1973	2004	2007
Slovakia	1993	2004	2004
Slovenia	1992	2004	2004

To assess developments in political stability and internal security within the Union, reference is made to the World Bank indicator 'Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism'.⁴⁸ This indicator measures the extent to which a country is affected by the risk of political instability and/or politically motivated violence, including terrorism.

Figure 4. WGI: Development of political stability and absence of violence/terrorism



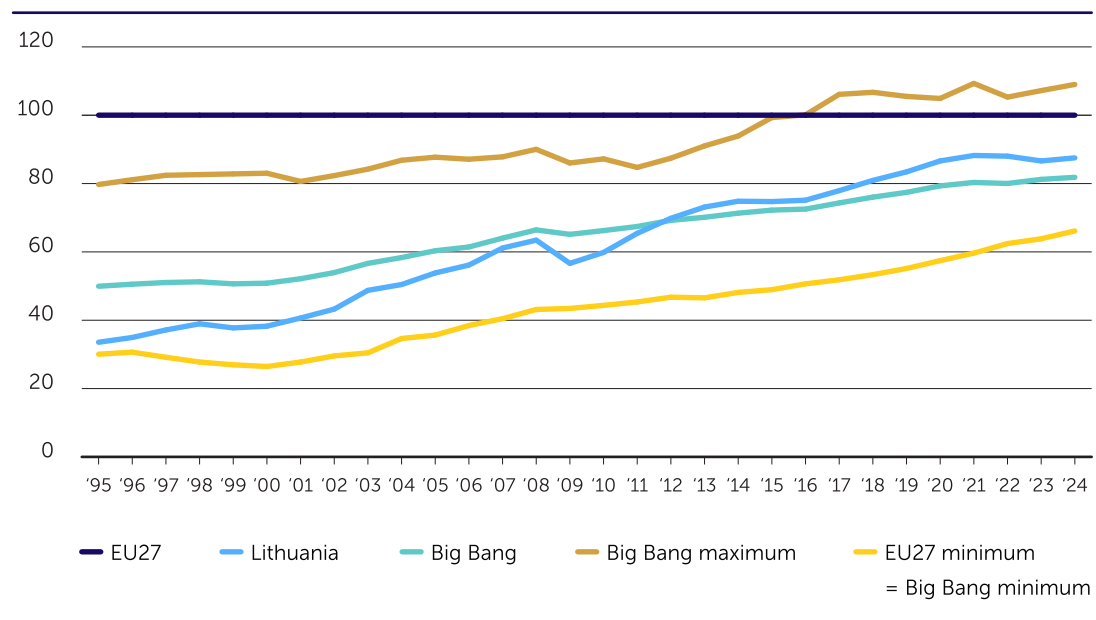
Source: <https://databank.worldbank.org/>

The index shows that – where differences already existed before accession – convergence has taken place. The average level of the twelve accession countries is now broadly in line with the average of the current 27 EU Member States. The lowest-performing accession country performs better than the lowest-performing older Member State.

Economy and broad prosperity

The EU's share of global GDP increased in 2004, following the 'big bang' enlargement, from 19.3 to over 21 per cent.⁴⁹ Figure 5 shows GDP per capita as an index relative to the EU-27 average. This demonstrates that GDP per capita in the 'big bang' countries has clearly converged towards the EU average. Some countries, such as Lithuania and Poland, perform relatively well within this group and have overtaken several older Member States. The gap between the wealthiest 'big bang' country and the wealthiest EU country remains substantial.

Figure 5. GDP per capita index (EU27=100, adjusted for purchasing power (PPS))



Source: Eurostat

Significant differences in prosperity also persist within countries and regions. Many regions in Central and Eastern Europe still have relatively low income per capita. But a number of regions, for example in Poland and the Baltic States, have also reached levels of prosperity comparable to those in Western Europe.

As a result of accession to the internal market, trade between new and existing Member States increased. Investment also rose in the candidate countries, with a significant share originating from existing EU Member States. The Czech industrial sector, for example, has been modernised and integrated into European supply chains, including in the automotive sector. The Netherlands is among the main investors in the Czech Republic, Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia and Hungary.

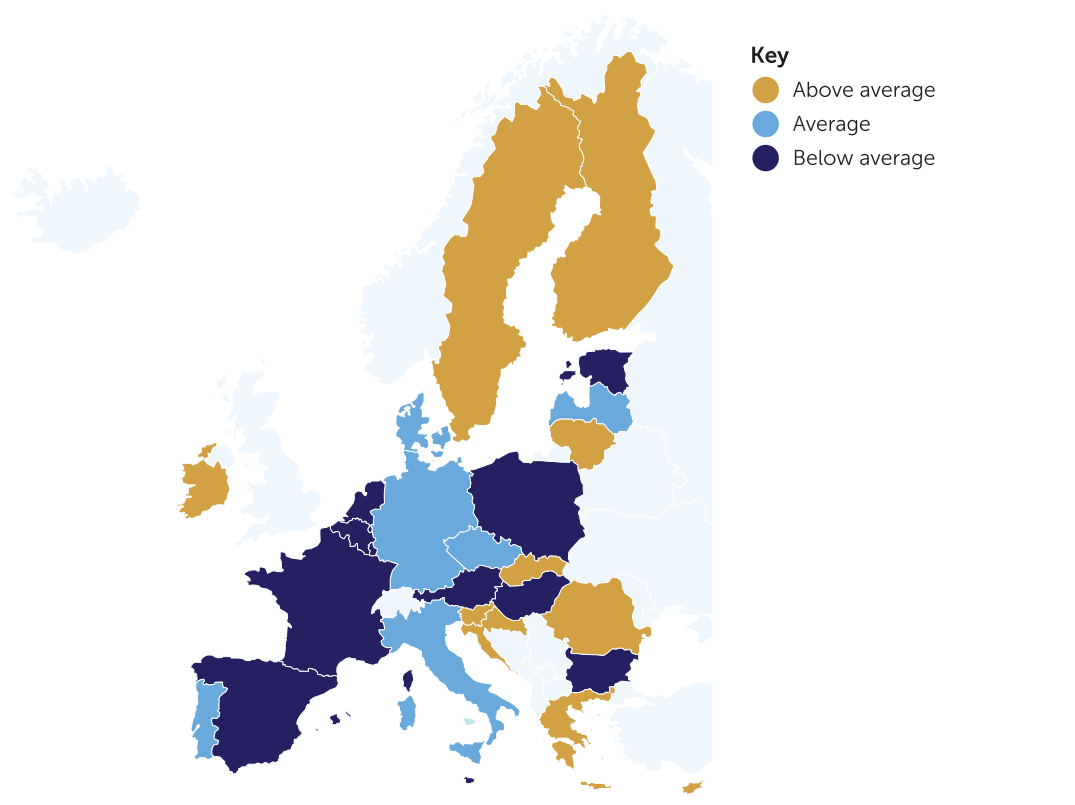
EU membership offers no guarantee against geopolitical and geoeconomic influence. Following the financial crisis, sixteen countries in Central and Eastern Europe (both EU Member States and candidate countries) joined a cooperation framework with China in the '16+1' format.⁵⁰ This forms part of the Belt and Road Initiative. The cooperation focuses on economic projects such as

infrastructure, investment in sectors including engineering, chemicals and renewable energy, and on cultural exchange. The EU, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and the EU Member State Austria participate as observers, partly because of concerns about EU unity and Chinese influence. Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia withdrew from the cooperation framework after China imposed a trade boycott on Lithuania following its decision – contrary to the One China policy – to allow an unofficial Taiwanese representative office in Vilnius. The EU has lodged a complaint with the WTO in this regard.

Institutions and values

The European Commission publishes annual data on the implementation of EU legislation by Member States in the Single Market and Competitiveness Scoreboard. This includes consideration of the transposition of directives into national law and the number and duration of infringement procedures against Member States. Member States are divided into three categories: above average (yellow), below average (dark blue) and average (light blue).

Figure 6. Overall performance from the Single Market and Competitiveness Scoreboard



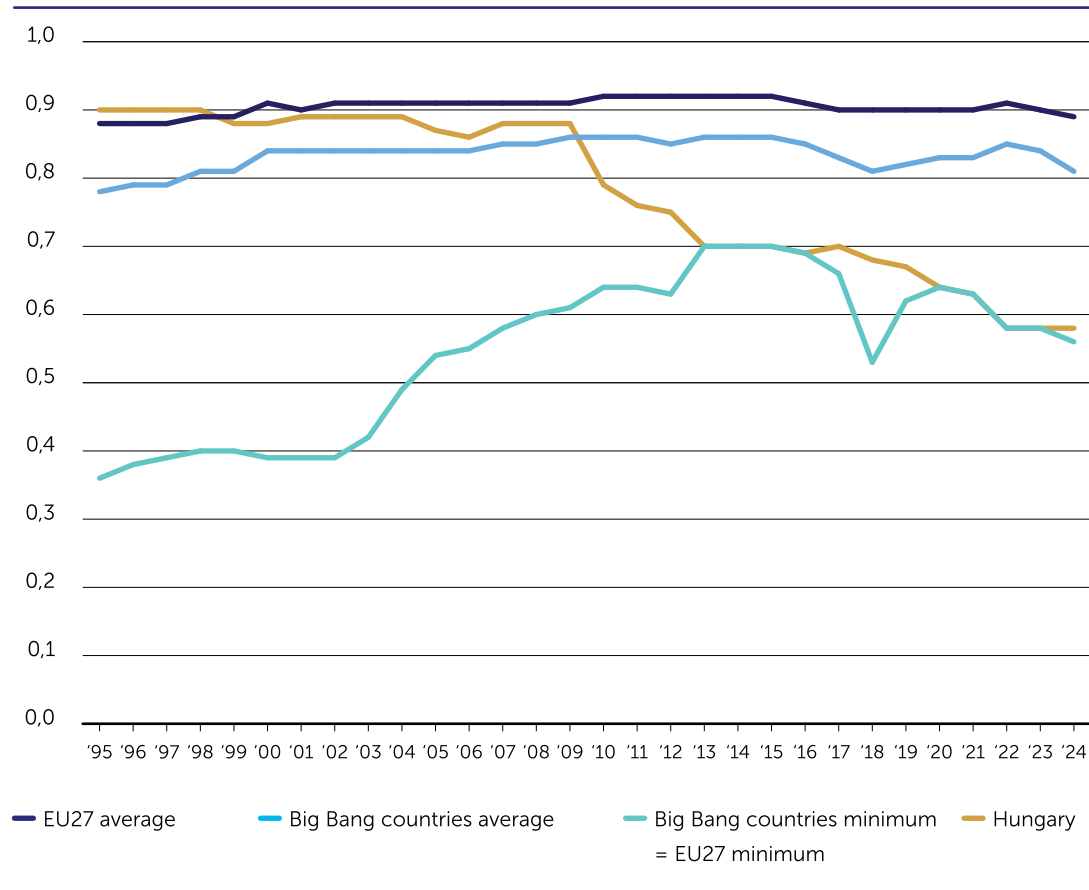
Source: European Commission [Transposition of Single Market directives](#) | [Single Market and Competitiveness Scoreboard](#)

The scoreboard shows that the best-performing EU countries are predominantly new Member States: Croatia, Cyprus, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia (Figure 6). The Netherlands scores below the EU average.

The rule of law index measures the extent to which laws are applied in a transparent, impartial, independent, predictable and equal manner (Figure 7). Although new Member States still score below the level of older Member States, some convergence is visible. The score of the lowest-performing countries has improved slightly. Differences between countries remain notable:

the Baltic States perform on a par with older Member States, while Hungary has declined from above average to the lowest score within the EU since 2009.

Figure 7. Rule of Law Index



Source: [Rule of law index \(V-Dem\), 2024](#)

2.3 Reforms and absorption capacity

Even before the 'big bang' accession, discussion arose about the reforms needed to ensure that the Union would continue to function effectively after enlargement. Four aspects are considered below: (1) values; (2) policy; (3) the budget; and (4) governance.

The context for EU reforms differed from that of earlier enlargement rounds. In the 1990s, European cooperation underwent a number of fundamental changes, including the Treaty of Maastricht and the Treaty of Amsterdam. This did not happen without resistance. The Danish electorate rejected the Treaty of Maastricht in a referendum, and a referendum in France produced only a very narrow majority in favour of the Treaty (*'petit oui'*). This marked the end of the 'permissive consensus' – the period in which European populations were, to a large extent, favourably disposed towards further European cooperation.

Values

The EU's core values (Article 2 TEU) are central to European cooperation. Well before accession, reforms were introduced to strengthen their enforcement. The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) introduced the Article 7 procedure: the sanctioning mechanism for breaches of fundamental EU values. The Treaty of Nice (2001) further strengthened this mechanism.

The immediate trigger was the formation of a government coalition in Austria (1999–2002) that included the far-right FPÖ party, led by Jörg Haider. This prompted a strong response from EU Member States, including the establishment of a diplomatic *cordon sanitaire*, but it had no effect on Austria's course. This underlined the need for robust protection of core values.

On the basis of this experience, and in light of the fact that the accession countries had relatively limited experience with democracy and the rule of law, greater emphasis was placed on EU core values in the enlargement process. At the accession of Romania and Bulgaria, for example – in part at the insistence of the Netherlands – the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism was introduced, providing for annual monitoring and reporting on rule of law reforms.⁵¹ However, the mechanism proved only partially effective.⁵² In the countries concerned, it also gave rise to perceived discrimination, as it placed only those countries under enhanced scrutiny.⁵³ As a result, the mechanism gradually fell into disuse.

Despite the increased attention, the EU was unable to prevent reversals in reforms relating to the rule of law and democracy in some new Member States. In response to backsliding in Poland and Hungary in the 2010s, the EU developed a rule of law toolbox that provides for monitoring of, and dialogue with, all EU Member States. Candidate countries Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are now also involved in this framework. In addition, budget conditionality has been introduced as an instrument to safeguard the rule of law.⁵⁴

The reform of the enlargement methodology in 2021 gave core EU values a central place: the 'Fundamentals' cluster became the starting point and end point of the negotiations. The European Public Prosecutor's Office and the anti-fraud watchdog OLAF were given powers under the reform and growth facility for candidate countries.⁵⁵ Finally, budget conditionality had already been applied in the various funds supporting accession. The revised enlargement methodology also introduced the principle of reversibility: steps towards accession can be reversed where reforms are undone. Not only can financial resources be withheld, but other rights that have been granted, such as market access, can also be suspended or withdrawn.

Policy

As it is not possible to comprehensively address all policy reforms in the context of enlargement, this section uses the free movement of workers as an illustration of how the Union dealt with policy reforms related to enlargement.

Transitional periods

Differences in levels of prosperity and wages led, at an early stage, to concerns about labour migration from east to west. Earlier enlargement rounds, in particular the accession of Spain, Greece and Portugal, had introduced a system of transitional periods to manage this.⁵⁶ The free movement of workers could be suspended for up to seven years after accession.⁵⁷

Member States took different approaches. The Netherlands opted for a relatively short transitional period (until 2006) during which work permits remained mandatory. These permits were issued on the basis of national priorities. Germany, France, Austria, Belgium, Spain and Finland applied longer transition periods. Following public and political debate, Sweden, Ireland and the United Kingdom deliberately adopted a liberal approach without restrictions.⁵⁸ Candidate countries were also permitted to restrict access to their own labour markets on a temporary basis.⁵⁹

Intra-EU migration increased significantly after the 'big bang' enlargement. Most migrants came from Romania (25%), followed by Poland (12%) and Italy (9%).⁶⁰ Germany received the largest share of intra-EU migrants (34%). According to research by the Dutch Association of Intermediary Organisations and Temporary Employment Agencies (NBBU), the Netherlands had 984,000 labour migrants in 2020, mainly working in sectors such as logistics, horticulture and the food industry.⁶¹ The number of intra-EU migrant workers after the 'big bang' exceeded expectations. Twenty years ago, the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) estimated that, following enlargement, between 3,500 and 8,500 additional immigrants per year would come to the Netherlands for a stay of at least four months in the period 2004–2006. It expected a gradual decline after 2006 (CPB, 2004). In practice, the number of immigrants in 2004–2006 was at the upper end of this range and continued to increase after 2006. Other studies also underestimated migration flows following accession.

The unexpectedly high level of labour migration after enlargement weakened public support for EU cooperation. The free movement of workers featured prominently in the pro-Brexit campaign.⁶² Meanwhile, a reverse movement has emerged: Polish workers are returning to their home country as economic prospects and living standards improve. Most return migration takes place from Germany and the United Kingdom.

Closer cooperation: Schengen

In addition to transitional periods, certain areas of European cooperation were not immediately subject to the *acquis* upon accession. Although the Schengen Agreement, which abolishes border controls between EU Member States, became part of the *acquis* following the Treaty of Amsterdam, EU membership does not automatically confer access to the Schengen area. A separate process applies, with additional requirements. Romania and Bulgaria only became full members of the Schengen area on 1 January 2025, partly because of resistance from the Netherlands due to concerns about corruption and inadequate border controls. A comparable approach applies to membership of the euro area.

Cooperation within the EU has become more differentiated. In line with the principle of equality, this differentiation is temporary and voluntary. EU membership ultimately entails participation in both the Schengen area and the euro area, provided that the relevant criteria are met, as required by the EU Treaties. The only exception is Ireland, which secured an opt-out when Schengen was incorporated into the *acquis*. All new Member States, with the exception of Cyprus, have now joined Schengen; Cyprus is currently undergoing the evaluation process for accession.

Budget

In 1997, the Santer Commission presented the report 'Agenda 2000: For a stronger and wider Union', setting out proposed reforms for the future of the European Union. Key areas of concern were the agricultural fund and regional policy, in light of fears that the costs would rise too sharply following the accession of new Member States. A significant share of the economy and employment in the former communist countries consisted of agriculture.

As a transitional measure, the new Member States initially received 25 per cent of the funding from this fund to which they would have been entitled under the rules as Member States. That percentage was increased to 100 per cent by 2013. In return, Member States received higher allocations for regional development from Brussels and were given more scope for national measures. A ceiling of 4 per cent of GDP per Member State was introduced for the structural and cohesion funds.

Figures from the Netherlands Court of Audit show that Hungary, Bulgaria, Lithuania and Latvia were the largest net recipients of EU funds in the period 2014–2019.⁶³ This is not in itself surprising, given that GDP per capita in these countries still lies well below the EU average. A large share of these funds came from agricultural and structural funds. Poland received approximately half of the total allocated to the eight Central and Eastern European accession countries included in this study, in absolute terms. Transitional periods were also used for the EU budget before these countries began to participate fully and on a regular basis.

Governance

Institutional reforms were also unavoidable in order to accommodate the new Member States. Discussions on these issues began during the negotiations on the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) but did not lead to consensus. In a declaration annexed to the Treaty, Belgium, France and Italy – with the support of the European Parliament – called for the strengthening of the institutions before the completion of the first accession negotiations. However, the subsequent intergovernmental conference ended without agreement.

Institutional relationships

A key issue in the discussions concerned the representation of Member States in the various EU institutions in a larger Union, including the number of Commissioners, voting weights and the number of seats in the European Parliament. These apparently technical matters determine the balance of power between the Council, the European Parliament, the Commission and the Member States. The following compromise was reached at the European Council meeting in Nice in December 2000, in one of the longest sessions in the history of the Council:

- The role of the President of the European Commission was strengthened. The President was given the power to appoint and dismiss Commissioners, allocate portfolios and reassign them during their term.
- The larger EU Member States (Germany, France, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom) relinquished their right to a second European Commissioner to make room for new Member States.
- The allocation of seats in the European Parliament was redefined for 27 Member States. Germany alone did not lose any seats, due to German reunification. All other Member States were required to give up seats on the basis of population size.
- The role of the European Parliament was strengthened in areas where decisions are taken by qualified majority voting (co-decision). The Parliament was not given a greater role in decisions requiring unanimity.

Voting arrangements

In addition to institutional balance, considerable attention focused on decision-making, in particular the voting weights used to determine a qualified majority. Larger Member States sought a greater weight in qualified majority voting in exchange for giving up their additional European Commissioners. France sought a greater weighting to compensate for the fact that Germany had obtained relatively more representatives in the European Parliament. The compromise reached in the Treaty of Nice was a complex combination of a majority of voting weights, a majority of Member States and a majority of the Union's population.

No progress was made in Nice on one of the most important reforms, i.e. extending the areas in which decisions would be taken by qualified majority rather than unanimity. Germany therefore pressed for a 'Declaration on the Future of the Union', which led to the Convention on the Future of Europe under the chairmanship of former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. It was tasked with drafting a European constitution in which such fundamental matters could be laid down.

Ratification

The task of drafting an EU constitution proved difficult from the outset. Supporters of an intergovernmental approach (the United Kingdom, France and Spain) argued in favour of a stronger Council of the EU with a permanent president, while the more pro-federal Germany and a number of smaller countries sought to strengthen the role of the President of the Commission instead. The draft EU constitution, which was adopted in Rome in October 2004, never entered into force following referenda in France and the Netherlands. This was attributed in part to dissatisfaction among voters, who felt insufficiently involved in decision-making on enlargement, the effects of which were only then beginning to be felt.

In response to the rejection of the EU constitution, the Treaty of Lisbon was drafted and entered into force in 2009. The Treaty amended the existing EU founding Treaties and incorporated many elements of the rejected constitution, including a stronger role for the European Parliament, the extension of qualified majority voting in the Council, and the introduction of a permanent President of the European Council and a strengthened position for the High Representative for Foreign Affairs. The role of national parliaments was also strengthened. Ratification did not proceed smoothly either: Ireland initially voted against it in a referendum. Ireland was able to ratify only after a second referendum.

Public support

EU enlargement is perceived differently across the Union. In the older Member States, the 'big bang' enlargement is sometimes seen as a rapid, and perhaps overly hasty, process. For the new Member States, the fifteen-year wait between the fall of the Berlin Wall and accession tested political and public patience. It is therefore not self-evident that a slower process would have produced better outcomes.

The course of the political process leading to the 'big bang' enlargement is understandable in light of the optimism that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall. Pressure to admit the former communist countries to the Union was considerable, and the symbolic significance of the 'big bang' enlargement was undeniable. The motivation of these countries to join the Union was exceptionally strong.

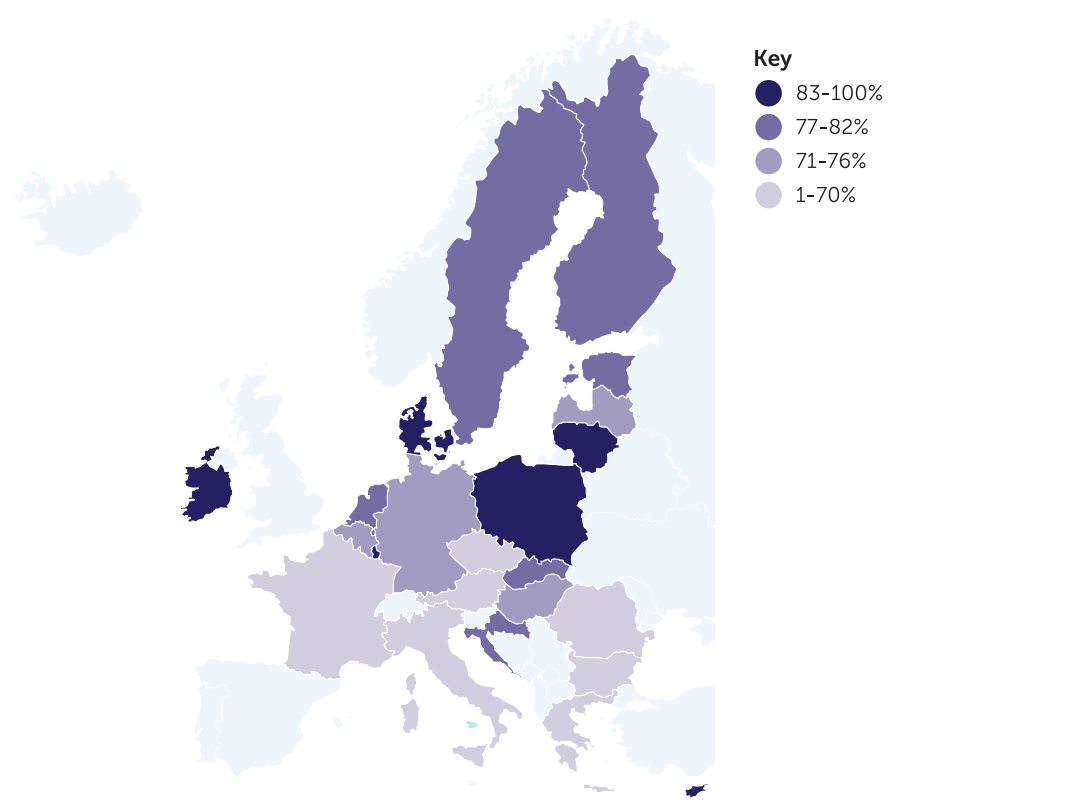
Before accession, the populations of the candidate countries voted on membership in referenda. With the exception of Malta, at least two-thirds of voters in every country voted in favour of EU accession. Malta briefly suspended its accession process in 1996 but resumed it following a change of government in 1998.

Table 5. Referendums on accession to the EU (2003)

Country	In favour	Against	Turnout
Czech Republic	77%	23%	55%
Estonia	67%	33%	64%
Hungary	84%	16%	46%
Latvia	68%	33%	72%
Lithuania	91%	9%	63%
Malta	54%	46%	91%
Poland	78%	22%	59%
Slovakia	94%	6%	52%
Slovenia	90%	10%	60%

In 2025, a number of the accession countries, including Poland and the Baltic States, ranked among the most positive EU Member States, as shown in Figure 8. The Czech Republic, Romania and Bulgaria, by contrast, ranked among the least positive Member States.

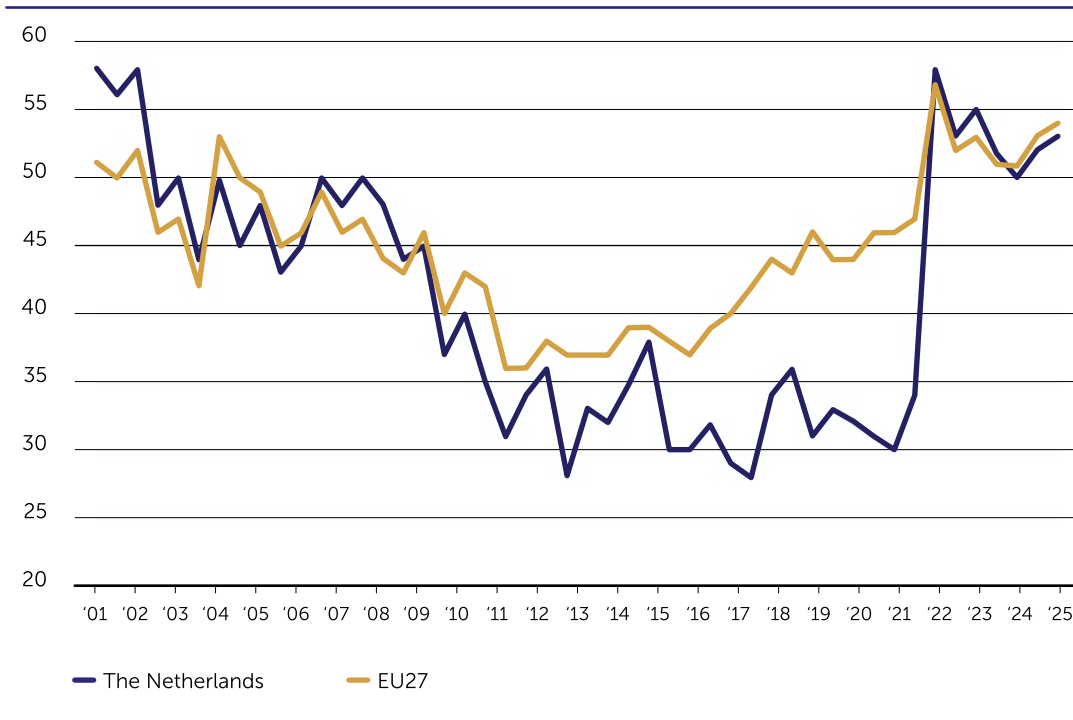
Figure 8. Has your country, broadly speaking, benefited from EU membership? (% yes)



Source: *EP Spring 2025 survey - September 2025* - *Eurobarometer survey*

The 'big bang' enlargement took place partly in the wake of, and partly alongside, other significant developments in European integration, including the introduction of the euro, a series of Treaty amendments (Amsterdam and Lisbon), and an attempt to introduce a European constitution. In some circles, this led to a sense of 'EU fatigue' which – reinforced by the financial and sovereign debt crises – resulted in 'enlargement fatigue'. This demonstrates that public and political support for EU enlargement cannot be taken for granted.

Figure 9. Support for EU enlargement, 2001–2025



Source: Eurobarometer 56-103

Support for enlargement has not remained constant: it declined at the beginning of this century, but recovered strongly after 2014, partly as a result of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Although more recent data since 2024 again show a decline, average public support remains well above the level seen in the early 2010s.⁶⁴ The national ratification processes for accession treaties will continue to represent a potential stumbling block in future enlargements.

2.4 Conclusion

The AIV draws lessons from the above review in three areas, both 1) on the extent to which EU accession has brought about convergence between old and new Member States and 2) on the reforms that were needed for enlargement.

Convergence

Broadly speaking, convergence in relation to the three main drivers of EU enlargement – security, prosperity and institutions – was most successful in the area of prosperity and proved most difficult in the area of values and institutions.

Security and stability

Although there is no counterfactual, cooperation within the EU appears to have led to better relations between EU accession countries than in countries that did not join the Union, such as the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Bilateral disputes between EU Member States continue to exist, but they do not generally lead to outbreaks of violence. The treatment of minorities has also improved. New Member States invested in their mutual relationships. In 1991, for example, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic established the Visegrád Group with a view to improving cooperation in the process of European integration. As conflicts often have cross-border effects, this has also increased the security and stability of older Member States.

The external security threat is shaped to a significant extent by the war in Ukraine. The threat emerging from that conflict is felt more strongly by the newer EU Member States. Even so, their position would be more precarious without EU membership. Significant steps still need to be taken to increase the Union's autonomous capacity to act and its deterrence capacity.

Economy and prosperity

Enlargement brought economic benefits for both old and new Member States. A prosperity gap still exists, but there is clear convergence. While the transition from a state-led economy to a market economy was impressive, it also placed significant demands on these countries. Shocks and frictions were needed to transform the economy within a short period. At present, the economies of the newer Member States show more dynamism than those of the older Member States, which contributes to the competitiveness of the Union.

However, the benefits of economic integration were unevenly distributed. Expectations were far from fulfilled everywhere. Certain countries, population groups and sectors benefited more than others. Adverse effects, such as abuses connected with labour migration, but also depopulation of rural regions and brain drain in the new Member States, were underestimated. Transitional periods for the free movement of workers and more differentiated forms of cooperation, such as Schengen, helped mitigate these effects.

Institutions and values

Convergence at the level of institutions and values has proved the most difficult to achieve. Although rule of law and democratic institutions developed very positively in a large number of the new Member States, developments in Hungary, Poland and Slovakia have strongly shaped the overall picture.⁶⁵ While the rule of law in Hungary underwent substantial reform before and shortly after accession, enforcement of the rule of law began to erode after 2013. Comparable developments could also be observed in other accession countries, such as Poland and Slovakia, and – albeit to a lesser extent – in older EU Member States as well.

This suggests that the incentive to reform is stronger during accession than afterwards, when enforceability also decreases. The risk of backsliding in the next accession round is real, especially as countries with a less established democratic and rule of law tradition are being admitted. The accession process has already been adjusted to take account of this, but further safeguards in accession treaties are desirable.⁶⁶ At the same time, it is arbitrary to distinguish between older and newer Member States in the extent to which they are held accountable for breaches of EU core values. The first-best solution therefore remains to use the current EU rule of law toolbox more decisively and effectively.⁶⁷

The social unrest and inequality resulting from the adjustments required in candidate countries undoubtedly influenced political developments in the new Member States. However, that is not to say that developments would have been more positive without EU accession. After all, developments in Russia under Putin also appear, in part, to have been a response to the period of political and social unrest that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Reforms and absorption capacity

The 'big bang' enlargement increased diversity within the Union. While this produced many benefits, it also placed the Union's internal cohesion under pressure, with consequences for its internal and external capacity to act. This applies in particular in policy areas where decision-making takes place by unanimity, such as the CFSP and the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

EU leaders did not succeed in implementing the necessary internal EU reforms before enlargement took place. Institutional reforms required sacrifices, for example giving up the additional European Commissioner by larger countries or increasing the budget. These issues will also return prominently in the next enlargement round and require thorough preparation.

Despite these challenges, enlargement has not weakened the EU's capacity to act in most policy areas. In times of crisis, such as the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, the EU has managed to respond quickly and mobilise resources. New EU legislation has also been adopted in many areas outside periods of crisis. The broader use of qualified majority voting has generally contributed to this capacity to act. However, sticking points remain, such as the unanimity requirement in the Common Foreign and Security Policy or the lack of agreement in other domains such as migration policy or climate issues. Overall, however, and despite stumbling blocks, it can be concluded that EU enlargement has not led to paralysis within the Union.

This review shows that enlargement can be assessed positively overall – not only for the new Member States, but also for the old Member States. Enlargement of the internal market gives Europe greater opportunities, the expansion of the group of countries that maintain peaceful relations with one another is a gain in a geopolitically divided world, and the possibilities for establishing safeguards to strengthen the rule of law are greater inside the Union than outside it. We should ask ourselves what position Europe would have been in, in light of the war in Ukraine, if countries such as Poland, Hungary and Lithuania had not acceded to the Union.

Albania and Serbia

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the situation in Albania and Serbia in turn, as an illustration of the divergent situations in candidate countries. For a complete overview covering all candidate countries, we refer to the European Commission's annual report on the state of EU enlargement.⁶⁸ This chapter describes where these countries currently stand in the EU accession process in three sub-areas: (i) security and stability; (ii) broad prosperity; and (iii) institutions and values. It also highlights focus areas that may give rise to supplementary policy or EU reforms.

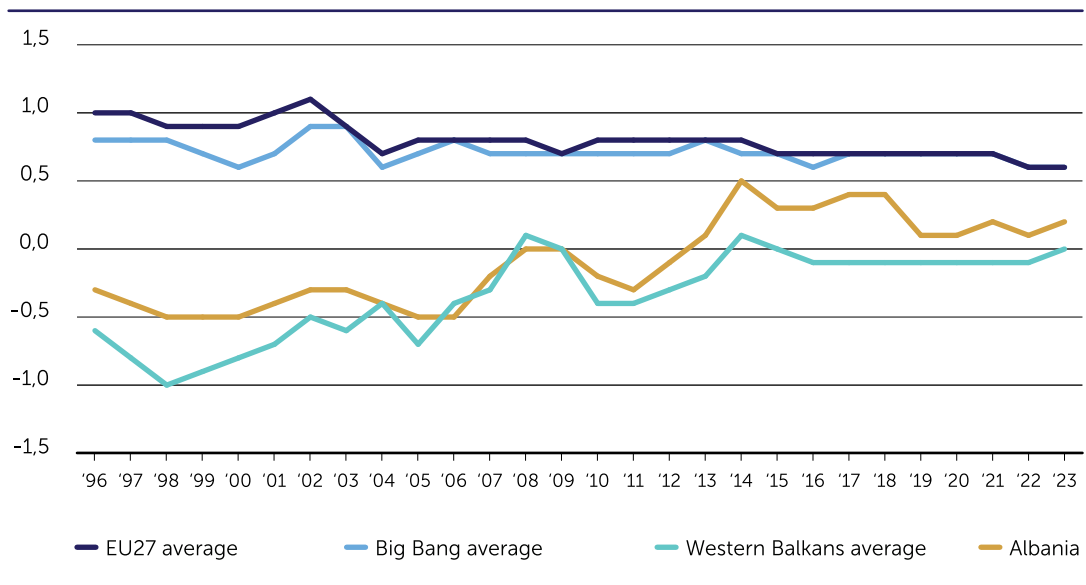
3.2 Albania

Albania submitted its application for EU membership in April 2009. In the same year, the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU entered into force. In 2014, the country officially became a candidate country. In 2020, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations, which formally began in 2024. All negotiating clusters have been opened since November 2025. Albania aims to close all chapters by 2027. The country may possibly accede to the EU by 2030.

Security and stability

Albania fully aligns with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and presents itself as a staunch supporter of European and transatlantic integration. Albania has been a NATO member since 2009 and an OSCE member since 1991. In 2027, Albania will host the NATO summit, underlining the country's Western orientation. Albania has participated in EU crisis management missions under the EU CSDP, including EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Albania received €13 million from the European Peace Facility to improve the operational effectiveness, mobility and protection of the Albanian armed forces.⁶⁹

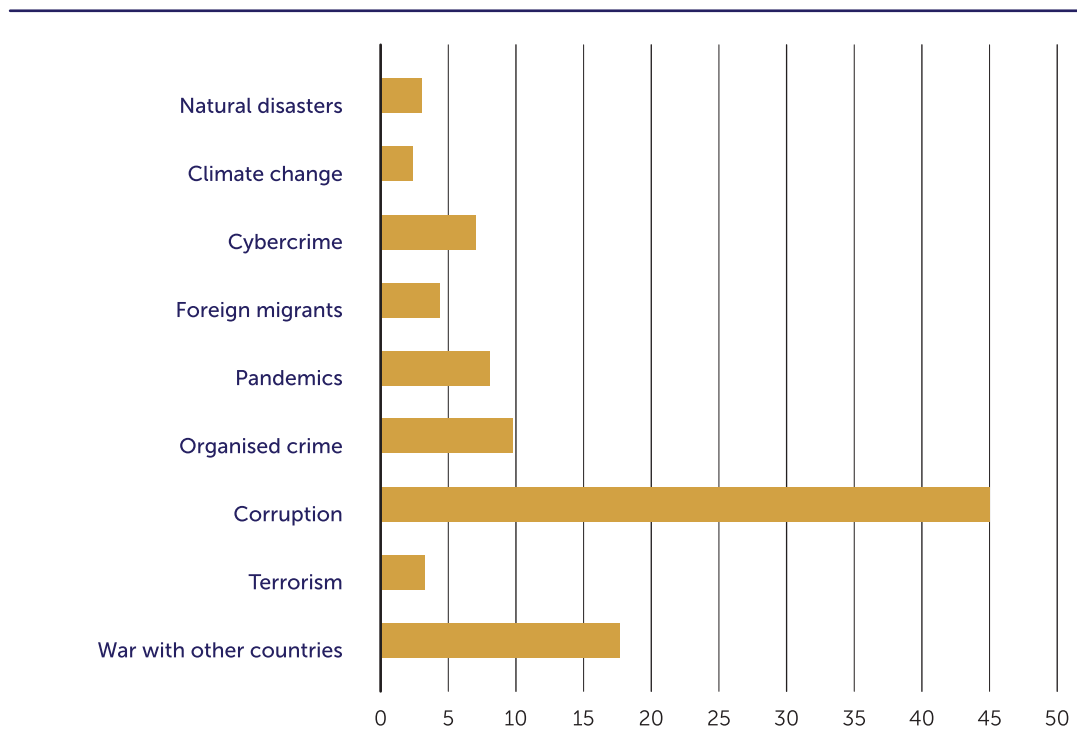
Figure 10. Political stability and absence of violence/terrorism



Source: World Bank – Worldwide Governance Indicators

In terms of political stability and the absence of violence and terrorism, Albania performs relatively well compared with the other EU candidate countries in the Western Balkans. The country has shown positive development since the early 2000s. Since 2010, it has performed comparably to, or better than, the lowest-performing EU Member State. Corruption, organised crime and war with other countries are identified as the principal threats to security in Albania.

Figure 11. Perceived security threats in Albania in % (2024)



Source: Albanian Security barometer national survey [21240.pdf](#)

Albanians attach importance to the relationship with the United States and Turkey: around 80 per cent of respondents regard the influence of these countries as positive or very positive. Russia and Iran, by contrast, are viewed predominantly negatively, while views on China are neutral.

In a national security survey, almost 80 per cent of respondents viewed Serbia, the largest country in the region, as a threat to Albanian security.⁷⁰ The Balkans have been marked by ethnic tensions for centuries. Kosovo remains a major point of conflict, where tensions between ethnic Serbs, who live mainly in the north, and ethnic Albanians, who live mainly in the south, regularly result in unrest and violence. Serbia does not recognise the independence of Kosovo – formerly a province of Serbia. Approximately 90 per cent of Kosovo’s population consists of Kosovar Albanians and around 5 per cent of Serbs. In 2021–2022, tensions threatened to escalate after both Serbia and Kosovo refused to allow number plates from the other country on their own territory. This led to blockades of border crossings, the besieging of government buildings and a brief taking-up of arms on both sides of the border. Calm was restored only after EU intervention.

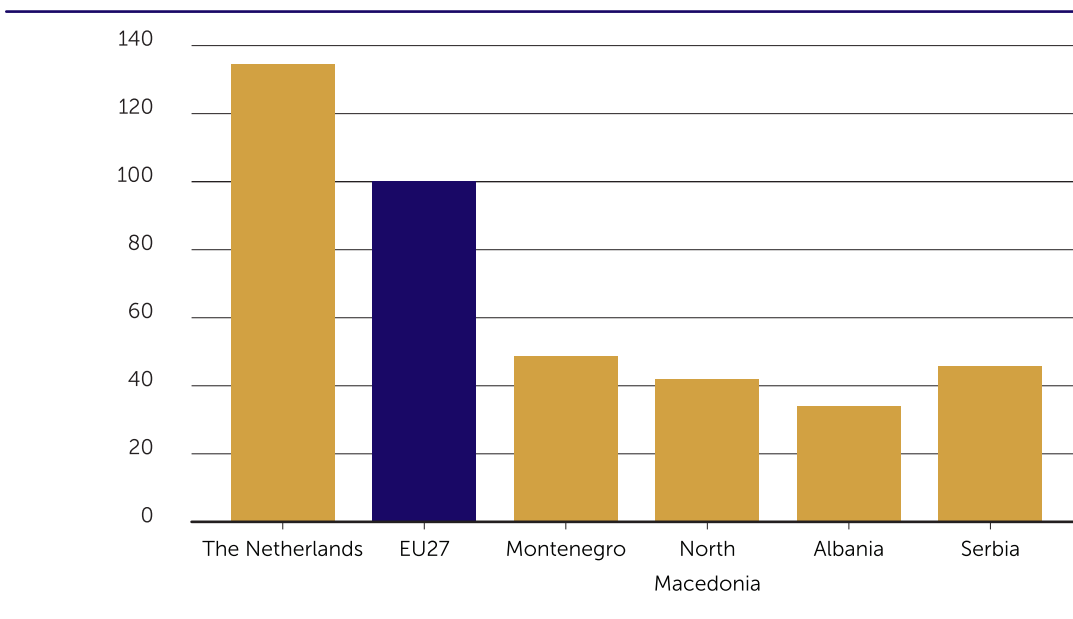
In the city of Mitrovica, the ethnic groups live separated by the Ibar river, with ethnic Serbs on the northern side and ethnic Albanians on the southern side. The UN, the EU and NATO maintain the fragile peace there through dedicated operations (KFOR, EULEX and UNMIK).

EU country Greece is seen as a threat by almost 20 per cent of respondents, mainly because of ethnic tensions around Albanian minorities in Greece and vice versa. The treatment of the Greek minority in Albania is a sticking point for Greece in relation to Albania’s EU accession.

Economy and prosperity

Albania is a small country: neither its GDP (0.1%) nor its population (0.6%) exceeds 1 per cent of the corresponding EU total. The size of the population has also shown a downward trend, falling from 3.3 million in 1990 to 2.7 million in 2024. That is twice the population of Amsterdam. Economic integration will therefore have relatively limited consequences for the existing EU Member States. Although Albania has shown good growth figures in recent years, it remains considerably below the EU average and below other candidate countries in terms of prosperity. Since the 1990s, there has been significant convergence with the EU: from 14.5 per cent of the EU average in 1997 to 34 per cent in 2022.

Figure 12. GDP per capita as % of EU-27 average (2022)



Source: Eurostat

The main sectors of the Albanian economy are services (55%), industry (23%) and agriculture (22%). Tourism is an important and growing source of income (9% of GDP), as are remittances from Albanians living abroad (10% of GDP).⁷¹ International trade accounts for around 37 per cent of GDP. The EU is by far the largest export partner (72%), followed by Serbia (10%) and Montenegro (8%). The main import partners are the EU (57%), Turkey (12%), Serbia (6%) and China (4%).⁷² Russia is not a significant trading partner.

According to the OECD Economic Convergence Scoreboard for the Western Balkans, Albania has made significant progress in improving the business environment. The country attracts a substantial inflow of investment. In terms of the labour market and skills, Albania performs almost at EU levels when measured by employment figures, PISA scores and educational attainment. Areas in which Albania still lags behind include the green transition and digitalisation.

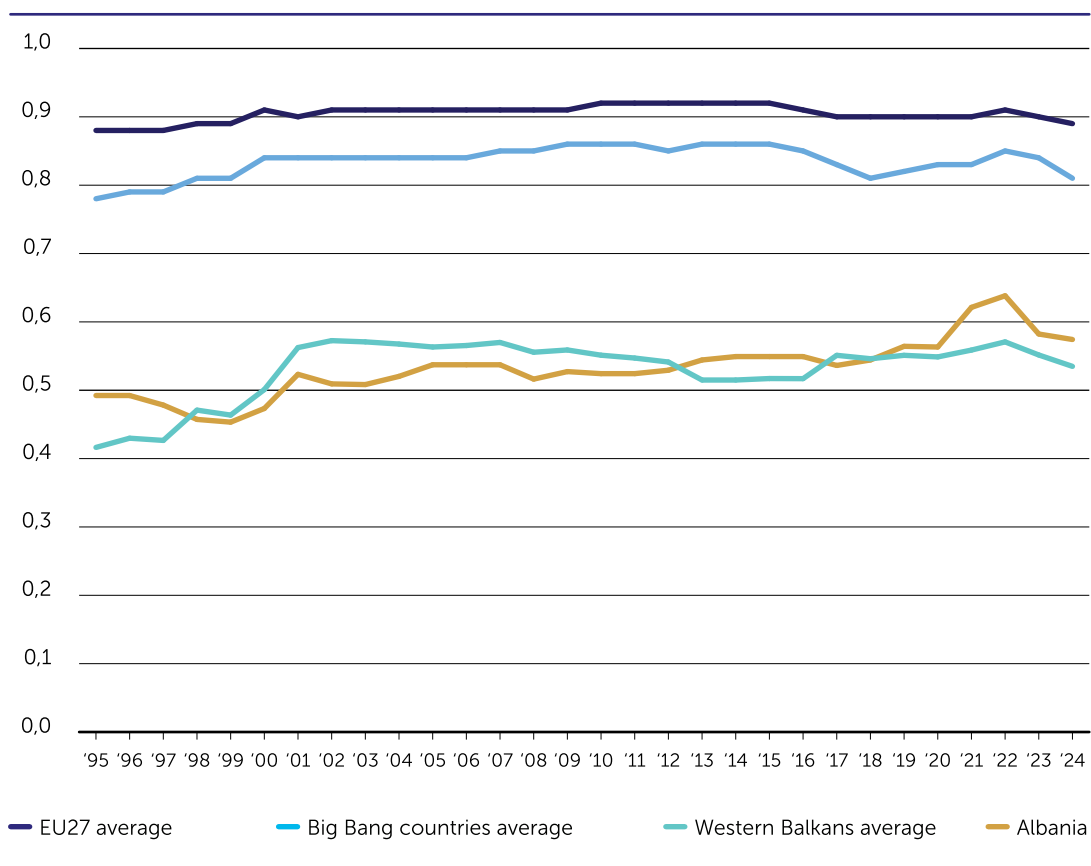
Institutions and values

In its most recent enlargement report, the European Commission confirmed that Albania is taking significant steps to align its legislation with EU standards, particularly in the areas of the market economy and public administration. Albania, together with Montenegro, is regarded as a frontrunner in the accession process.

The Republic of Albania is a secular state with a number of religious communities: 50 per cent of the population is Muslim, over 8 per cent Roman Catholic and 7 per cent Greek Orthodox. Albania is regarded as a relatively tolerant country, with mixed marriages and limited radicalisation. Clear progress has been made on rule of law reform. For the first time, high-ranking politicians have been convicted through a new, independent judicial body. Albania has also implemented judicial reforms under which judges and prosecutors have been vetted to safeguard their independence.

Figure 13 shows that Albania's rule of law index – like that of the other accession countries – remains well below the EU level.

Figure 13. Rule of law index (2024)



Source: [Rule of law index \(V-Dem\), 2024](#)

Democratic vulnerabilities also remain. In the parliamentary elections in May 2025, the incumbent pro-EU Prime Minister Edi Rama defeated the Eurosceptic and pro-American opposition leader Sali Berisha, who had been strategically supported by Chris LaCivita, Donald Trump's former campaign manager. According to the OSCE, the elections were conducted professionally, but there was no level playing field. Although Rama is strongly committed to EU integration, he has a personalist political style. Albanian politics shows autocratic tendencies, a weak opposition and polarisation that paralyzes parliament.

Albania still has a widespread culture of corruption, which manifests itself within government, healthcare, construction and business. In February 2026, large-scale protests broke out in Tirana following a corruption scandal involving Deputy Prime Minister Balluku. These scandals demonstrate that while there is still some way to go in terms of reforms, existing reforms are having an effect, as they are exposing corruption at the highest levels. The anti-corruption body, SPAK (Specialised Structure for Anti-Corruption and Organised Crime), has brought major cases, including against the Mayor of Tirana. SPAK is under pressure from both politicians and oligarchs. The Netherlands supports SPAK through the MATRA programme. A Minister for Artificial Intelligence has been appointed, one of whose responsibilities is to ensure that public procurement procedures are free from corruption. Organised crime also remains a problem, as does media freedom. Journalists are subjected to intimidation and the media are largely controlled by oligarchs.

Reforms and absorption capacity

The integration of relatively small Albania is not expected to place too much strain on the absorption capacity of the Union and its Member States. Maintaining the reforms implemented during the accession process is crucial. Additional safeguards against backsliding are needed. The Commission already intends to include these in the new generation of accession treaties.

The effects on policy and the budget are expected to be limited, given the size of the country and the access it already has to funds and the internal market. In budgetary terms, €922 million in grants and loans is currently reserved for Albania under the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, provided the country meets the milestones in its reform agenda. Under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance III, Albania received €500 million in grants in the period 2021–2024 to support energy, environmental protection and the circular economy, as well as the restoration of schools and cultural heritage following the 2019 earthquake.

The main governance question is the 'small countries' issue that also arose in the big-bang enlargement: how much influence should relatively small countries have in decision-making? On the one hand, it is difficult to explain democratically that a country with a population twice the size of Amsterdam can delay EU decision-making through a veto and carry the same weight as Germany and France in the day-to-day administration of the Union through its own European Commissioner. On the other hand, cooperation between sovereign Member States necessarily means that not all decision-making can be surrendered. Prime Minister Rama recently indicated that Albania would be willing to temporarily relinquish the right of veto and the right to its own European Commissioner if this were necessary for accession. In the long term, however, this is unsustainable from the perspective of the principle of equality and this problem requires EU-wide reform.

Support for EU membership is strong in Albania: 86 per cent support EU membership and over 80 per cent want to continue the necessary reforms. Public opinion on accession is the most positive of all Western Balkan countries. At 81 per cent, trust in the European Union in Albania is considerably higher than the EU average of 51 per cent. More than 60 per cent of the population believe that Albania will become a full member of the Union within ten years. Barely 7 per cent believe that Albania will never become an EU Member State. The expected benefits lie mainly in the area of the economy and broad prosperity (34%), followed by the freedom to work, travel and study within the Union (25%), democracy (13%) and peace (10%).⁷³

Support in the current EU Member States is less convincing. On average, 45 per cent of respondents are strongly or somewhat in favour of Albania's accession, compared with 44 per cent who are strongly or somewhat opposed and 11 per cent who are neutral. Support varies from 30 per cent in the Czech Republic and Austria to 74 per cent in Sweden. In the Netherlands, 59 per cent of respondents are in favour.⁷⁴

3.3 Serbia

Serbia has been a candidate country since 2012 and has been conducting negotiations on EU accession since 2014. To date, 22 of the 35 chapters have been opened, of which only two have been provisionally closed. Since 2021, no noticeable progress has been made in the accession process, as is evident from:

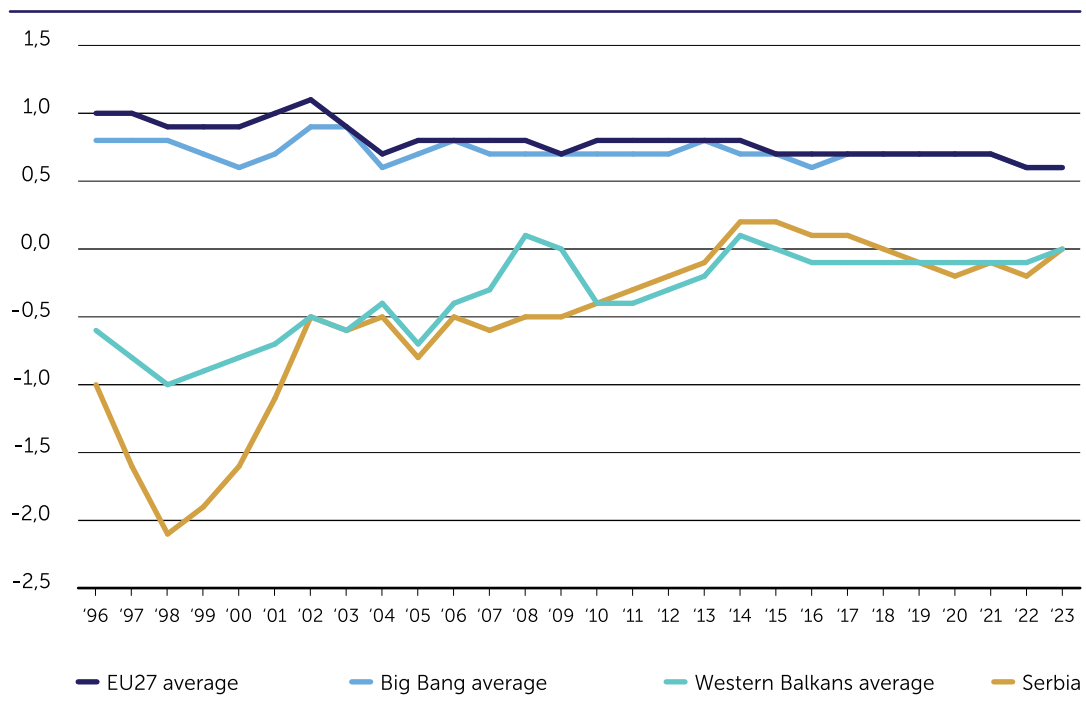
- persistent breaches of the rule of law
- restrictions on media freedom
- widespread corruption
- close relations with Russia and China
- the difficult normalisation of relations with Kosovo

Security and stability

As the largest country and historical centre of the region, Serbia has a pivotal role in the Western Balkans; developments in Serbia can spill over into the region, for better or worse. Although Serbia still faces major challenges in the field of security and stability compared with both the EU and the 'big-bang' countries, it performs at a comparable level to other countries in the Western Balkans. Serbia is a member of the OSCE, cooperates with NATO under the Partnership for Peace and regularly contributes to CSDP missions, including in Somalia and Mali.

Serbia is currently pursuing a course of strategic ambivalence by maintaining good relations simultaneously with the EU and with Russia and China. This was illustrated during a military parade in Belgrade in September 2025, where French-made Serbian Rafale fighter jets flew alongside MiG aircraft of Russian origin and Chinese air-defence systems were displayed, in the presence of both French and Chinese military delegations

Figure 14. Political stability and absence of violence/terrorism



Source: World Bank – Worldwide Governance Indicators

This ambivalence raises questions about the credibility of the EU accession process and the commitment of the Serbian government. The government of President Aleksandar Vučić maintains good ties with the Kremlin, while Russia is currently the main destabilising external actor in the Western Balkans. The Kremlin is trying to block the European and transatlantic integration of the Western Balkan countries through a narrative of Slavic brotherhood based on cultural and historical ties with Russia, and through close personal links with local political elites. Serbia's dependence on Russian energy increases that influence: in the past, Russia held an almost complete monopoly on gas and oil supplies.⁷⁵ Russia also uses various channels of influence, including:

- the Russian Orthodox Church, as a cultural and ideological link
- local media as a channel for pro-Russian propaganda
- connections with organised crime to undermine political and social stability

Half of Serbs (51%) name Russia as their most important foreign partner, compared with 18 per cent for the EU and 19 per cent for China.⁷⁶ The majority of the population supports neutrality in the Ukraine war. In the United Nations, Serbia voted with the EU on resolutions against Russia's war of aggression, supplied weapons to Ukraine, reduced its dependence on Russian energy and chooses to purchase European and Chinese weapons rather than Russian systems. Nevertheless, its position remains ambivalent: Serbian implementation of EU sanctions against Russia has shown no progress since 2022, despite Serbia's obligation as a candidate country to align itself ever more closely with the EU sanctions regime ('progressive alignment').

China takes a subtler but equally strategic approach in the region, aimed at embedding influence sustainably through major infrastructure projects, often under the Belt and Road Initiative, and close relations with local political elites. Although China acts in a less confrontational and explicitly political manner, Chinese involvement may in the long term undermine the region's European integration and institutional development.

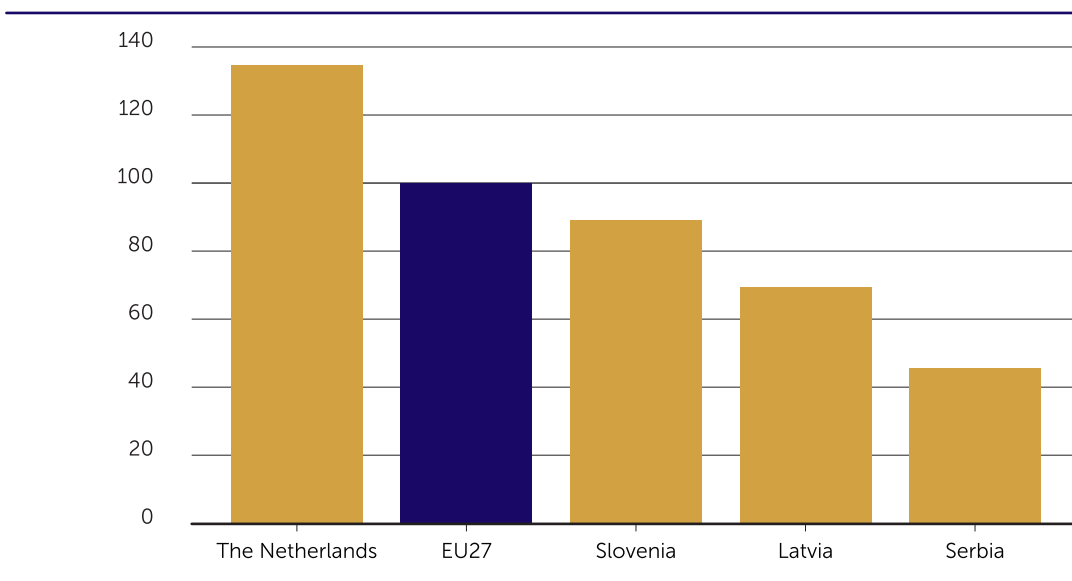
Chinese investment also carries risks. Such investment often does not comply with European norms and standards, leading to problems such as poor transparency, corruption, debt traps through which countries become financially dependent on Chinese loans, and unsafe construction and environmental standards. For example, the collapsed railway station in Novi Sad, built by a Chinese state-owned company, led to mass protests (see below).

Serbia is involved in several regional conflicts that affect the country's security and stability. The process of normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo – a condition for EU membership – has deteriorated significantly in recent years. Serbia does not recognise Kosovo. Tensions are particularly high in northern Kosovo, where many ethnic Serb civilians live. This region functions as a flashpoint of the conflict, partly because of historical, cultural and political ties with Serbia.⁷⁷ At the heart of the conflict lies the fact that northern Kosovo remains de facto under Serbian influence. Any attempt by Kosovo to establish sovereignty in the area – such as the number-plate policy – leads to protests supported by Serbia. The internal political dynamics in both countries exacerbate tensions. Serbia is experiencing increasing autocratisation. Approximately 66 per cent of the population supports the current policy towards Kosovo.⁷⁸ In Kosovo, the Kurti government has adopted a harder line towards Serbia, particularly in the north of the country, where the ethnic Serb minority is concentrated.

Economy and prosperity

With the exception of Ukraine, Serbia is the largest candidate country in terms of both population (6.6 million) and its economy (with a GDP of €82.3 billion). Serbia's level of economic prosperity – measured on the basis of GDP per capita – stands at 46 per cent of the EU average. Figure 15 shows that GDP per capita still remains well below the levels of the 'big bang' countries. The relative gap compared with the EU average is comparable to that of the 'big bang' countries in 2004.

Figure 15. BBP per capita index 2022 (EU27=100, PPS)



Source: Eurostat

Serbia's economic growth has been disappointing in recent years. Relatively high inflation caused by fluctuating food and energy prices, combined with political uncertainty due to protests and waning support for the government, is dampening growth expectations and confidence in the economy.

EU accession by Serbia, which borders Slovenia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, would close a geographical gap in the internal market. As a result of its geographical location and size, Serbia occupies a pivotal position in the Western Balkans and often functions as a hub through which businesses gain access to the regional market. A well-educated workforce contributes to an attractive business environment. Key sectors of the Serbian economy include the automotive industry, agri-food, IT, and electrical equipment and machinery.

The EU is Serbia's largest trading partner, accounting for almost 60 per cent of its total trade. By comparison, China's and Russia's shares are 9 per cent and 4 per cent respectively. Almost half of incoming investment flows originate from the EU, compared with a quarter from China. China's share has grown rapidly over the past decade. The strategic importance of economic ties with Serbia is underlined by the free trade agreement that China concluded with Serbia in 2023 – the first such agreement with a country in the region. The Gulf states and Turkey have also strengthened economic ties in recent years.

For the Netherlands, Serbia is the most important trading partner among all candidate countries after Ukraine.⁷⁹ Trade between the Netherlands and Serbia has grown strongly since 2016 and consists mainly of industrial products, agricultural goods and services (SEO, 2025). Serbia is integrated into the EU market in important respects: it has tariff-free and quota-free access through the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and joined SEPA in 2025, making payments between the EU and Serbia faster, cheaper and more secure.

In a study commissioned by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, SEO (2025) concludes that the competitive pressure on Dutch producers from Serbia's accession will be limited, because businesses in the Western Balkans are already integrated into existing EU value chains. Accession would, however, offer opportunities to source cheaper raw materials and semi-finished products from Serbia.⁸⁰

According to the OECD, Serbia's convergence with the EU is relatively good in the areas of infrastructure and connectivity, skills and digital transformation.⁸¹ In terms of the business environment, Serbia ranks in the middle of the group due to a high level of informal employment and increasing concerns about corruption. Serbia performs worst in the area of greening, where convergence has deteriorated since 2014–2016, particularly because of the slow transition to green energy.

Strategic autonomy

Serbia is of strategic importance to the EU because of its substantial lithium, copper and gold reserves. Serbia's strategic importance is also recognised by other countries. China gained a foothold as early as 2018 through an investment of USD 1 billion in the Bor Mining and Metallurgical Complex under a strategic partnership with the Chinese state-owned company Zijin Mining Group. Zijin Mining Group acquired a 63 per cent majority stake in the RTB Bor complex on condition that 5,000 jobs in Bor would be safeguarded.⁸²

In 2024, Serbia and the EU signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for a raw materials partnership. This partnership focuses on the development of value chains for raw materials, batteries and electric vehicles, research and development, Environmental, Social and Governance

(ESG) standards, the development of financial infrastructure and the development of skills and jobs in the raw materials sector. Through this cooperation, the EU also hopes to counter Chinese influence in the region and sector.

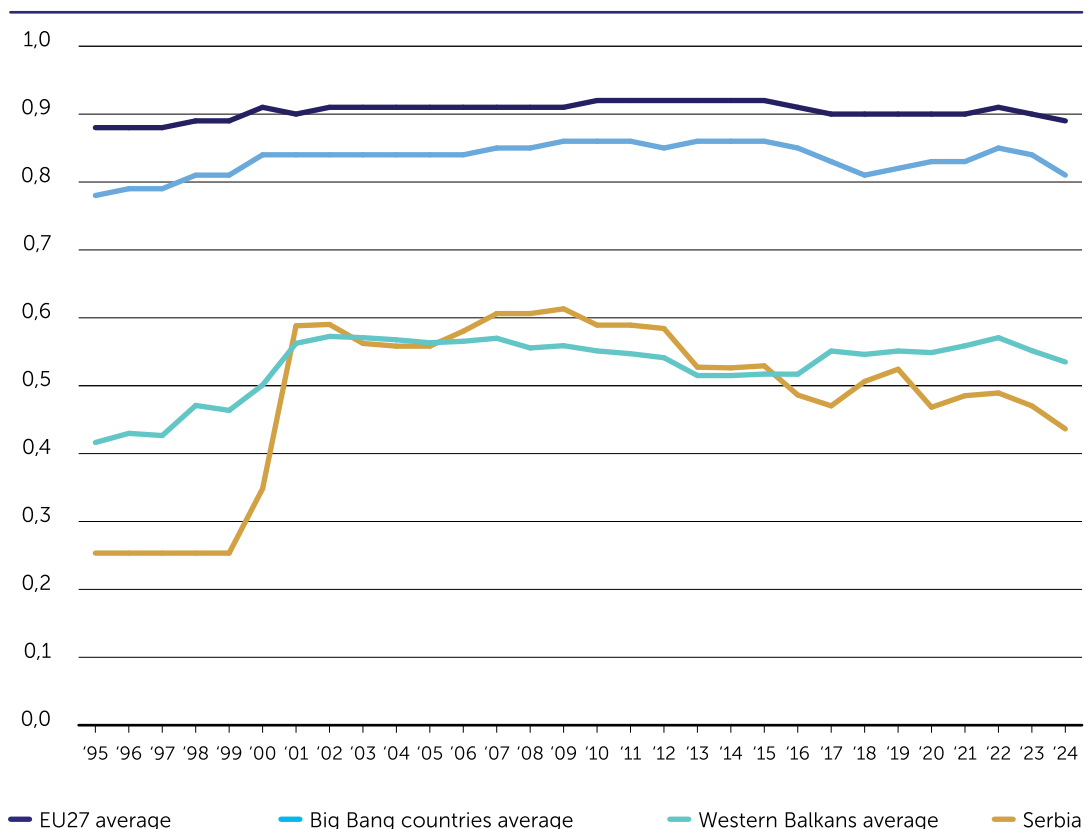
Cooperation in the lithium-rich Jadar Valley, highlights several challenges for the EU. This cooperation, which began long before the raw materials partnership was signed, has prompted protests since 2020 because of a lack of public consultation, concerns about environmental damage and pressure on landowners to sell their land under threat of expropriation. The project was halted in 2022 under pressure from protests; since then, there has been uncertainty about the continuation of the activities.⁸³

Before the war in Ukraine, Serbia depended heavily on Russia for its energy supply. Shortly after the Russian invasion in 2022, Serbia caused significant irritation within the EU by concluding a major energy agreement with Russia. Serbia is now reducing this energy dependence. With EU support, it opened a gas pipeline between Serbia and Bulgaria in 2023, enabling the country to import gas from Greece and Azerbaijan. The pipeline covers 60 per cent of Serbia's gas needs, which has significantly reduced its dependence on Russia. Under pressure from international sanctions, tensions arose between Belgrade and Moscow over Russian control of the Serbian state energy company Naftna Industrija Srbije (NIS). Serbia is currently negotiating a multi-year gas contract with Russia.⁸⁴

Institutions and values

Serbia scores considerably below both the EU average and the average of the 'big bang' countries on the rule of law index. The country also scores worse than most Western Balkan countries.

Figure 16. Rule of law index (2024)



Serbia shows a clear anti-democratic trend: power is highly centralised around President Vučić and his party. Critical voices are suppressed through pressure on independent media and strategic lawsuits against critics.⁸⁵

Since November 2024, Serbia has seen mass protests against the government following the collapse of part of the railway station in Novi Sad, which killed sixteen people. Protesters blame government corruption. The protests, involving many people, especially students, have been largely peaceful, but have recently seen more unrest. The government has responded harshly. Support for Vučić is dwindling in the polls, although the next parliamentary elections are not scheduled until 2027. Vučić uses demonstrations with a more pro-European orientation for political purposes, dismissing them as an EU attempt to overthrow his regime. At the same time, the protest movement is disappointed by the lack of support from Brussels, despite recently increasing diplomatic pressure.⁸⁶

The democratic backsliding must be seen against broader geopolitical developments, particularly since the Maidan revolution in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of Crimea. In this context, both Russia and China have increased their influence in the country. At the same time, Western countries have at times tolerated the authoritarian tendencies of the Serbian elite in the interest of short-term stability.

In its latest progress report, the Commission concludes that the pace of reform in Serbia has clearly slowed and that reforms in some areas, such as media freedom and academic freedom, have even been reversed.

Reforms and absorption capacity

Serbia's integration into the Union – if only because of the size of the country – is a greater challenge than the integration of Albania. Its larger population could, for example, lead to more labour migration.

Nevertheless, the effects appear manageable. For example, SEO (2025) expects labour migration from Serbia to the Netherlands to remain limited, as Serbia has had the right to visa-free travel in the Schengen area since 2009 and relatively significant migration has already taken place. Out of a population of 6.6 million, 0.5 million Serbs already reside in the EU (SEO, 2025). The starting position in existing EU Member States is also different, and targeted labour migration is already taking place in a number of sectors, such as healthcare and engineering services. In 2015, Germany introduced the Western Balkans Regulation to fill certain labour market shortages. SEO also expects migration to follow familiar patterns, with many Serbian migrant workers settling in Germany and Austria. National policy, such as transitional arrangements, will partly determine the direction and scale of migration flows.

Serbia's integration requires a number of institutional reforms, such as the reallocation of seats in the European Parliament, a new determination of voting weights and a decision on the composition of the European Commission. This is comparable to the adjustments made during the 'big bang'.

Support for EU membership in Serbia is low: only 40 per cent of the population is in favour and only 37 per cent of the population trusts the Union. In existing EU Member States, an average of 47 per cent of the population supports Serbia's EU accession, compared with 43 per cent opposed, ranging from 34 per cent in France to 75 per cent in Sweden. The Netherlands, at 59 per cent, lies between those two extremes.

3.4 Conclusion

The two sketches of Albania and Serbia in this chapter illustrate the major differences between candidate countries. Albania can be admitted to the Union relatively easily: it is small, dynamic, Western-oriented and has political momentum for EU accession. The point requiring attention is the extent to which the reforms have taken sustainable root in political and administrative reality. There is a clear role here for the Commission, Council and the Member States in ensuring continued oversight. Support for accession is positive: 59 per cent of the Dutch population supports accession, but concerns about corruption, organised crime, terrorism and economic inequality are clearly present.

Serbia, by contrast, has two significant points of concern: 1) an ambivalent course between the EU and Russia, as a result of which the country falls short in its alignment with the EU's CFSP; and 2) democratic and rule of law backsliding, together with a lack of reforms. Set against that, Serbia has strategic value for the EU because of its pivotal role in the region and the presence of strategic raw materials.

The tension between geostrategic considerations and a merit-based process therefore emerges earlier with Serbia than with Albania. The EU's cautious stance towards Serbia to date has been driven by fears that the country might move further towards Russia. However, it has not produced measurable improvements in democracy, the rule of law, media freedom, state capture or good governance – all core conditions of the accession process. Delaying Serbian membership while countries such as Albania accede may be used in Serbia to argue against the EU and to maintain the course of strategic ambivalence, with the risk that Russia's influence increases. Conversely, Albania's swift accession may also serve as evidence for reform-minded people in Serbia that the EU honours its accession promise when all reform conditions are met.

Ukraine

4.1 Introduction

On 28 February 2022, four days after the Russian invasion, Ukraine applied for membership of the EU. Four months later, the European Council granted it candidate status and opened accession negotiations. The Belgian Presidency noted: 'The future of Ukraine and its citizens lies in the European Union'.

At present, EU membership appears to form part of the negotiations concerning a ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia.⁸⁷ President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is asking for a specific date as a security guarantee and has stated that Ukraine is making every effort to be technically ready for EU accession by 2027.⁸⁸ However, accession on 1 January 2027 appears, for the time being, to be incompatible with the current accession methodology, under which all Copenhagen criteria must be met.

In its latest progress report, the Commission emphasises the progress Ukraine is making on the necessary reforms. The Commission expects the country to be technically ready to open all negotiating clusters by the end of 2026. Since July 2025, however, Hungary has blocked the opening of the first negotiating cluster, Fundamentals, despite an earlier agreement to grant candidate status. The newly elected Hungarian President Magyar has indicated that he is more positive about Ukraine's EU membership: *'[Budapest will] accept the countries that are ready to join rather than making them wait in line because that wouldn't be in the interest of the European people.'*⁸⁹ At the same time, Magyar indicated that he does not support accelerated EU membership for Ukraine.

German Chancellor Merz has unequivocally ruled out accession in 2027 under the current methodology: *'Ein Beitritt zum 1. Januar 2027 ist ausgeschlossen. Es geht nicht.'* (Accession on 1 January 2027 is out of the question. It cannot be done).⁹⁰ There is tension between geopolitical pressure and the merit-based approach. According to media reports, an attempt by the Commission to allow Ukraine to join the EU on an accelerated basis outside the current accession methodology ('reversed accession') failed because of resistance in the Council.⁹¹ The technical work to implement the EU acquis in Ukraine nevertheless continues.

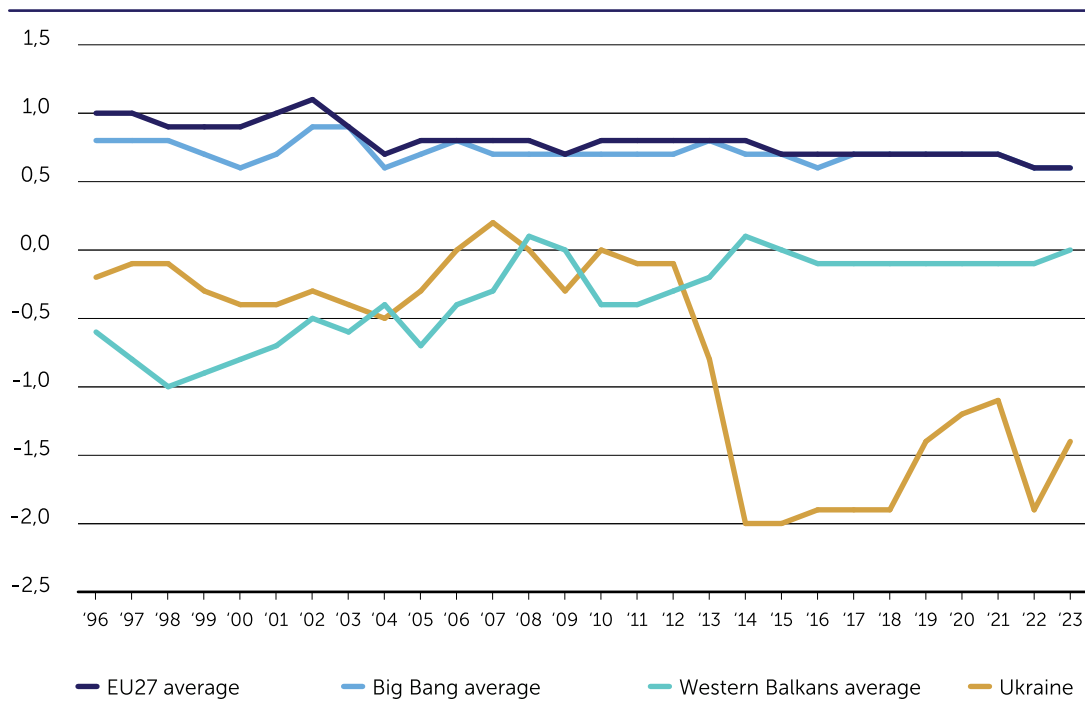
In line with the previous chapter, this chapter assesses the state of play around EU accession for Ukraine in the areas of security, prosperity and institutions and values. It also examines the reforms required in order to integrate the country into the Union.

4.2 Security and stability

Ukraine is in a unique and acute security and stability crisis and therefore differs fundamentally from other candidate countries. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Russia's full-scale war of aggression in 2022, the country has been plagued by continuing violence and instability; see Figure 17.

Ukrainian society has been severely disrupted. Bombardments have caused extensive damage to infrastructure. Power supplies repeatedly fail. Part of the population is fighting on the front line, has been displaced or has fled the country. Ukraine remains under martial law. As of 2026, Russia is estimated to control approximately 20 per cent of Ukrainian territory and, despite intense Ukrainian resistance, continues to capture additional territory.⁹² The 'progress' is slow, however: according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Russia has captured less than 1.5 per cent of Ukrainian territory since 2024. That is around 15–70 metres per day – considerably slower than in other major conflicts, including the First World War.⁹³

Figure 17. WGI: Development of political stability and absence of violence/terrorism



Source: World Bank

Meanwhile, the number of casualties continues to rise. According to the United Nations, at least 14,999 Ukrainian civilian casualties and 40,601 injuries have been recorded, although the actual figures are presumed to be considerably higher.⁹⁴ The UA Losses project reports that 86,142 Ukrainian military personnel have been killed, 89,324 are missing and 4,461 are being held in Russian captivity.⁹⁵ The number of Russian military deaths is estimated at between 190,000 and 480,000, with the number of wounded estimated at between 984,000 and 1,438,000.⁹⁶

Russia is committing systematic war crimes, including targeted attacks on civilians, hospitals and energy infrastructure, and the abduction and torture of both civilians and military personnel. The Ukrainian Public Prosecution Service has documented 180,000 war crimes.⁹⁷ The United Nations has confirmed that these acts constitute war crimes, and the International Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant for President Putin.⁹⁸

Even in the most optimistic scenario, Ukraine's stability and security will remain uncertain because of the disruption and destruction the war has caused in society. Even before the Russian invasion, Ukraine had the largest illegal black market for small arms and ammunition in Europe. This poses a risk to the Union, as became clear after the Balkan war. The German Ministry points out that terrorist attacks in Europe have partly been committed using illegal weapons originating from that region.⁹⁹ The consequences of the war will shape the internal functioning of Ukrainian society for many years to come. The question for the EU is whether the risks are more manageable with Ukraine inside the Union or outside it.

Control over territory

The active war in Ukraine acts as both a driver of and an obstacle to EU membership. The first obstacle lies in the political Copenhagen criterion requiring stability – a condition that is almost impossible to meet in a state of war and resistance. The country lacks control over parts of its territory.

However, this is not unprecedented: Cyprus acceded to the EU in 2004 despite partial occupation. Since 1974, the Turkish part of the island has been under Turkish rule and is recognised as a separate state only by Turkey. Although the whole island is regarded as EU territory, the EU acquis applies only in the part controlled by the Greek Cypriot government. Reunification of the island was not a condition for EU membership.¹⁰⁰

Deterrence capability and the mutual assistance clause

A fundamental challenge of Ukrainian membership lies in the EU's absorption capacity in the field of security and defence. Russia represents a security threat to the Union. Ukraine's accession would extend the existing border with Russia and therefore the security threat. This is happening at a time when NATO is under pressure and the alliance's security guarantee is uncertain for the foreseeable future.

Although Article 42(7) TEU requires EU Member States to provide aid and assistance by all the means in their power in the event of an armed attack on another Member State, the EU does not currently appear able to fulfil this obligation, despite intensified defence cooperation and defence spending, especially against nuclear power Russia. Continued support from the US may be essential for crucial enablers such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, space-based assets and long-range ballistic missiles.

Even so, Ukraine's EU accession offers strategic advantages in the longer term. It strengthens European security and stability and may curb Russian aggression towards the EU and its Member States. The threat from Moscow will not diminish in the coming years. Russia's military capabilities have increased. The war economy contributes significantly to the country's economic growth. Even in the event of a ceasefire and a period of relative calm, there remains a realistic possibility that Russia will once again attempt to seize Kyiv. Eight years elapsed between the outbreak of fighting in the Donbas and the invasion of 2022.

In addition, Russia is expanding its hybrid warfare towards the Union and its periphery. Russia is already achieving successes in this regard, for example through the use of disinformation campaigns to influence elections in Georgia. According to news reports, Russia is also further fuelling discord between Hungary and Ukraine by influencing Hungarian minorities in Ukraine.¹⁰¹ This underlines the need to integrate Ukraine structurally in Europe. Now that NATO membership for Ukraine is uncertain, EU membership is the best alternative.¹⁰² There is a clear risk to Ukrainian

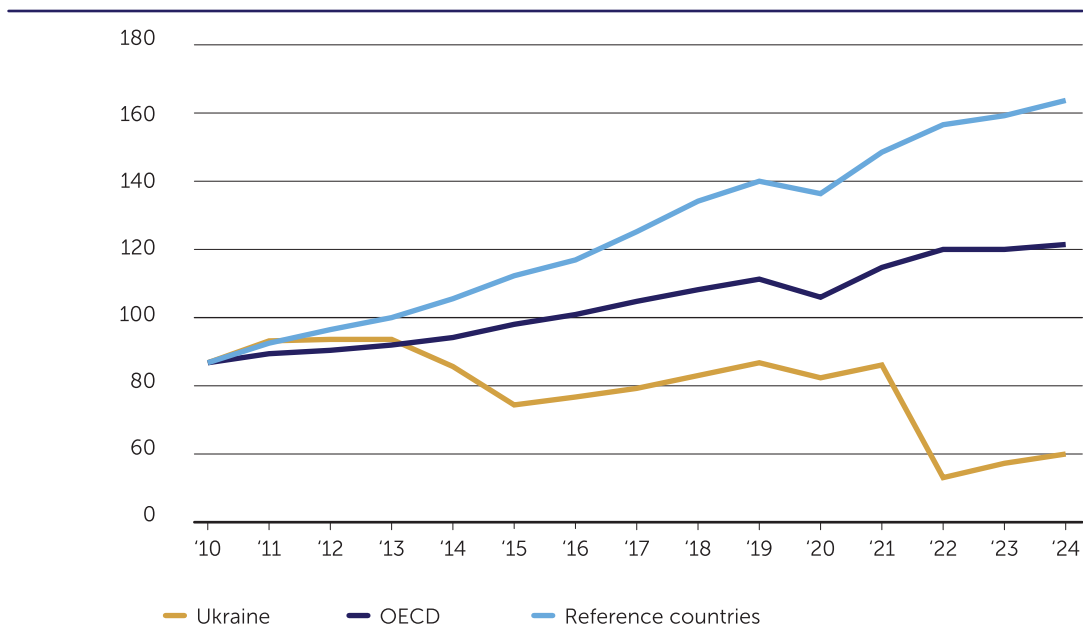
morale if the EU prospect disappears after the NATO prospect. The security risk to the EU, particularly the Baltic states, should therefore not be underestimated.

Ukraine is not only a risk, but also an asset for the EU. It has one of the largest and most experienced armed forces on the continent, with expertise in modern warfare, including drones and AI, hybrid warfare and a large defence industry that is closely connected to EU industry. Rheinmetall, for example, has entered into a joint venture with the company Ukrainian Defence Industry for joint ammunition production. Companies from non-EU countries such as Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States are likewise entering into similar partnerships.

4.3 Economy and prosperity

The active war, with all the associated disruption to the workforce and the energy supply, also makes it difficult to meet the second Copenhagen criterion, which requires a stable market economy capable of withstanding competitive pressure from within the EU. The Ukrainian economy has suffered an enormous blow as a result of the war. Before the Russian invasion, the country had a population of approximately 41 million. Around 8 million people have fled the country and 6 million Ukrainians live in occupied territory. In 2024, Ukraine's GDP per capita stood at approximately 28 per cent of the EU-27 average. Before the war, that figure was still 35 per cent. In concrete terms, Ukraine's GDP in 2024 was around USD 190 billion. Poland's GDP, with a comparable population, is USD 915 billion.

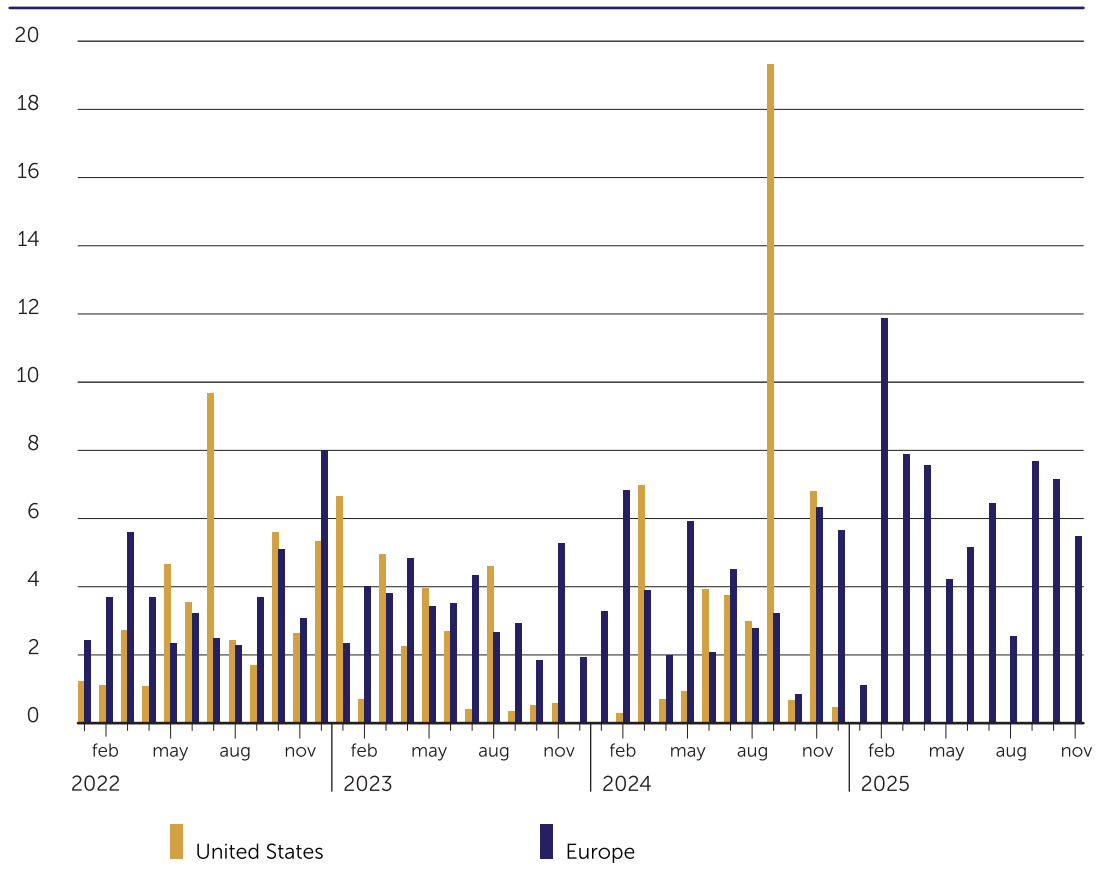
Figure 18. Development of GDP (2010=100, constant prices in dollars (PPS))



Note: reference countries refers to the unweighted average of Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Turkey. OECD (right-hand axis) refers to the unweighted average of all OECD countries. Source: [OECD Economic Surveys: Ukraine 2025](#) | OECD

Since the beginning of the war, the economy has been recovering slowly, partly thanks to substantial foreign financial support; see Figure 19. In February 2026, the United Nations estimated Ukraine's reconstruction needs at USD 588 billion, approximately three times Ukraine's GDP.¹⁰³ In 2022, GDP fell by around 30 per cent after the invasion. More than 35 per cent of national income is currently spent on defence.¹⁰⁴ The longer the war continues, the greater the reconstruction challenge becomes, and the EU will have to bear a significant share now that support from the US is less certain; see Figure 19.¹⁰⁵ Although decision-making on additional funds is sometimes difficult, for example because of Hungarian vetoes, it has so far always proved possible to make the necessary funds available.

Figure 19. State aid to Ukraine (EU and US) 2022–2025 (in €bn)



Source: [Ukraine Support Tracker - Kiel Institute](#)

Ukraine's principal trading partners are the EU, China and Turkey. Key Ukrainian export goods include metals, energy products and agricultural goods. Around 60 per cent of Ukrainian exports go to the EU, particularly Poland, Romania and Germany. The Netherlands ranks eighth worldwide.

Strategic autonomy

Food security

Ukraine's large agricultural sector poses a challenge for EU agricultural policy (also see section 4.5). At the same time, it is also an asset for the Union. As the 'breadbasket of Europe', it contributes to the Union's food security. The Russian blockade of the Black Sea in 2022 underlines Ukraine's role in global food supply. As a major supplier of grain, particularly to Africa and the Middle East, Ukrainian EU membership could also strengthen ties with countries in the Global South.

Energy security and energy-intensive industry

In the longer term, Ukraine can also contribute to the EU's energy security, provided that the energy infrastructure is restored after the war. Russia's war of aggression has exposed the Union's strategic vulnerabilities in painful fashion. After Norway, Ukraine has the largest gas reserves in Europe and has significant energy storage capacity. In addition, because of its land area and geography, the country has great potential for the generation of renewable energy and hydrogen energy. In 2023, the EU and Ukraine concluded a MoU for a strategic partnership on biomethane, hydrogen and other synthetic gases.

Ukraine is also investing in new nuclear energy generation capacity. Access to cheap renewable energy would help the Union to make energy-intensive sectors such as the steel sector more sustainable and to expand them, which is essential for the Union's strategic autonomy. The literature makes various suggestions for already involving Ukraine more closely in the internal energy market, for example by giving the Ukrainian regulator observer status in working groups of the Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators, ACER.

Raw materials

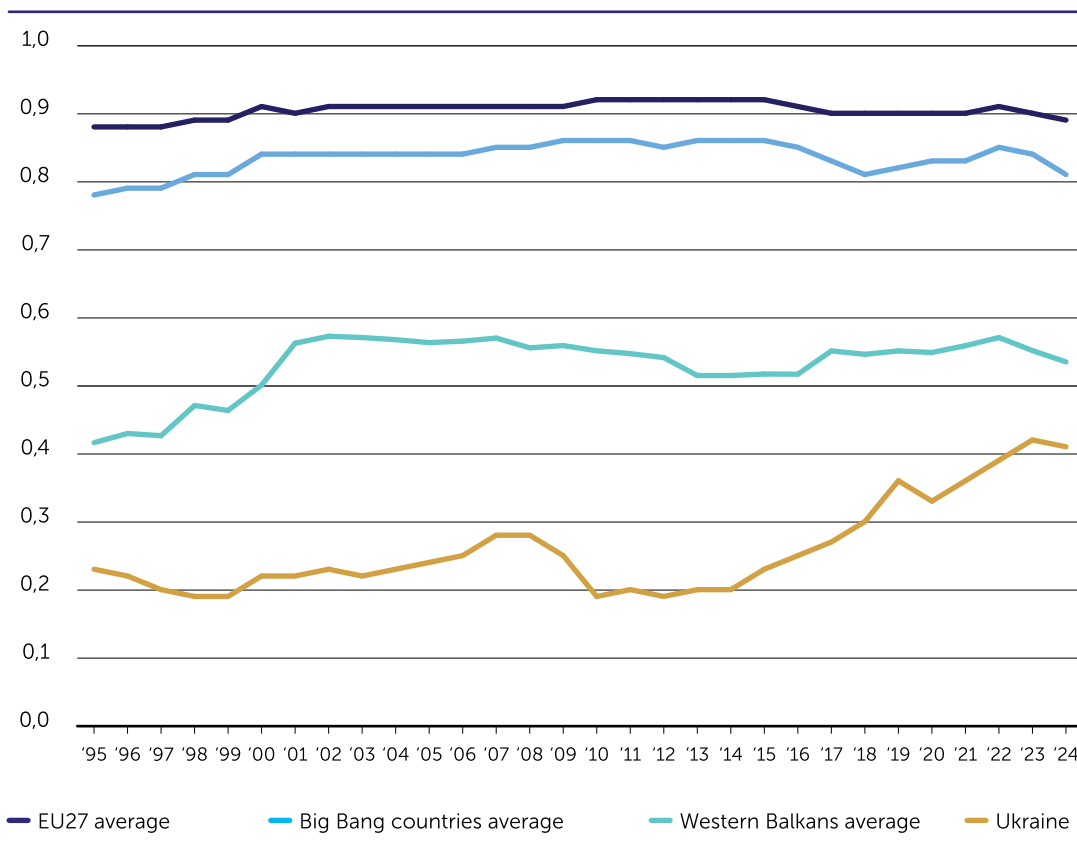
Finally, Ukraine has strategic raw materials, including titanium, iron, manganese, lithium, graphite, nickel, cobalt, tantalum, niobium and beryllium. Some of these reserves are located in occupied territories. Their importance was already clear from the deal with the US in 2025 on access to raw materials and energy. The EU is also working on further cooperation through a strategic partnership and a MoU with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Although cooperation in these areas is also possible outside EU accession, integrating Ukraine in the Union would provide a more solid basis.

4.4 Institutions and values

Compared with other candidate countries, Ukraine has moved quickly through the first steps in the formal membership process. Its willingness to reform is high. Figure 20 shows that the country has both made considerable progress and still has a long way to go to reach the level of existing EU Member States. The European Commission confirms this in its most recent 2025 progress report.¹⁰⁶ Despite the war, Ukraine has succeeded in continuing its reform efforts.

Corruption remains a major concern. In the summer of 2025, the European Commission warned Ukraine against undermining the independence of two important anti-corruption authorities – an intention that also prompted widespread protests in Ukraine. These testify to a widely supported desire in Ukrainian society to implement reforms. In November 2025, the Ministers of Justice and Energy resigned after a scandal involving bribes in contracts awarded to the Ukrainian energy company Energoatom.

Figure 20. Rule of law index (2024)



Source: [Rule of law index \(V-Dem\), 2024](#)

Other issues include the influence of oligarchs, the absence of democratic processes during the war and concerns about the rule of law. In December 2025, Commissioner Kos and Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Kachka presented a 10-point plan with specific priorities for reforms on corruption and the rule of law in the coming year.¹⁰⁷

4.5 Reforms and absorption capacity

If Ukraine joins the EU, it will become the sixth Member State in terms of population size. The integration of a Member State of this size cannot but have consequences for EU structures and policies. Points of concern relating to values, policy, the budget and governance are discussed below.

Values

Ukraine still needs further reforms in the area of the EU's core values. In view of previous experiences with backsliding, additional guarantees are needed in accession treaties. Unlike candidate countries Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, Ukraine is not yet included in the European Commission's annual rule of law report. It is recommended that this be done as soon as possible.

However, the inadequate safeguarding of the rule of law is a broader problem in the EU: in November 2025, the World Justice Project found that rule of law safeguards are deteriorating in more than two-thirds of EU Member States, with the greatest deterioration in Slovakia and Hungary.¹⁰⁸ Additional guarantees in accession treaties do not solve this problem and may lead to criticism of double standards if they do not also apply to existing EU Member States.

It is unclear whether additional safeguards introduced through accession treaties (on the basis of Article 49 TEU) could also be imposed on existing EU Member States, or whether this would require a regular treaty amendment under Article 48 TEU. In 2025, the Meijers Committee, a group of independent legal experts advising on EU and international law, concluded: *'Which amendments to the Treaties may be introduced through the Article 49 TEU procedure – without triggering the ordinary or simplified Treaty revision procedures under Article 48 TEU – remains an open question.'*¹⁰⁹ The Court of Justice of the European Union will have to rule on this.

All Member States must agree to an accession treaty, but amending the EU Treaties through accession treaties carries a risk of failure: enlargement may be blocked for reasons connected with EU reforms rather than accession. EU-wide reform – preferably within the foreseeable future – is therefore preferable.

Policy

Ukraine's accession to the EU will be felt in several policy areas. The following sections discuss effects in agriculture and in relation to the free movement of workers, because these are expected to attract public attention.

Agriculture

Agriculture accounts for around 40 per cent of total Ukrainian exports. In 2022, the EU received a preview of the consequences of trade liberalisation in agricultural goods. Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Lithuania temporarily closed their borders to Ukrainian agricultural goods when import duties on these goods were temporarily suspended in 2022 in response to the war. The policy was intended to allow these goods only to transit through the EU without entering the EU market. After all, other transport routes out of Ukraine, particularly via the Black Sea, were closed. Because of a lack of enforcement, some of these goods unintentionally entered the EU market, creating competition for local farmers. EU policy was then adjusted: in the 2025 revision of the EU-Ukraine trade agreement, this exemption from import duties for certain sensitive agricultural goods was partially rolled back.

The consequences of liberalising trade in agricultural goods are significant for existing EU Member States.¹¹⁰ Before the war, the total area of arable agricultural land in Ukraine was around 33 million hectares, equal to one-fifth of the total area in the EU. By comparison, France and Spain have 27.4 million and 24 million hectares respectively. The structure of Ukraine's agricultural sector differs from that of the EU agricultural sector. As a legacy of the Soviet system, with its large agricultural collectives (kolkhozes) and state-run farms (sovkhozes), the average agricultural enterprise in Ukraine is much larger. In the EU, 93 per cent of farms are classified as family farms, with an average size of 11 hectares. Ukraine, by contrast, has around 8,600 agricultural enterprises of between 200 and 2,000 hectares. These account for more than half of grain production. Family farms are active mainly in fruit and vegetable production, although they largely produce for the domestic market. The large-scale nature of many Ukrainian agricultural enterprises makes Ukraine competitive on the international market. Ukraine is the world's largest producer of sunflower oil and sunflower seeds and is among the top five producers of barley, maize and wheat.¹¹¹

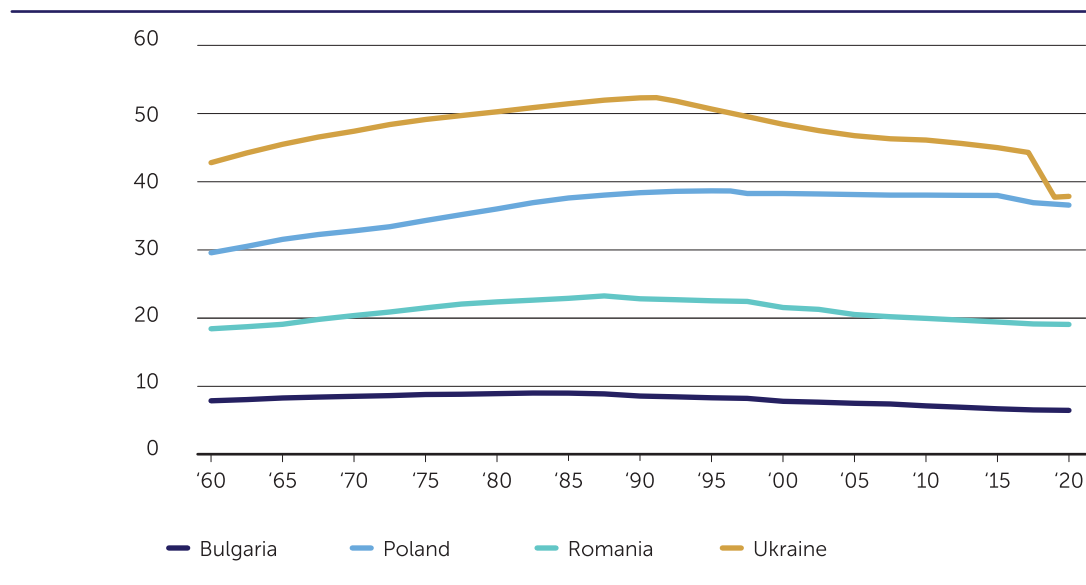
The consequences for Dutch agriculture are likely to be limited, as it is complementary in terms of crops and production methods. Dutch agriculture is competitive, geographically distant from Ukraine and, with the exception of poultry and sugar, focuses on other products. Accession may also offer opportunities, for example by supplying labour in agriculture and horticulture or because the EU could use partially cheaper Ukrainian grain, instead of soya from South America, as animal feed. Overall, the balance is expected to be positive for the Netherlands. The risk of competition is greater for other Member States, such as Poland, Germany and France. Without safeguards, trade liberalisation will lead to resistance, as was also apparent from the recent Mercosur agreement. It is therefore recommended that provision be made for long transitional periods and safeguard measures. There is also scope for EU-wide reforms of agricultural policy aimed at global competitiveness.

When the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and free trade agreement were being finalised, product standards were also a point of discussion in the Netherlands, for example in relation to imports of eggs from battery cages. This production method has been prohibited in the EU since 2012. Under the Association Agreement, Ukrainian product standards are being further harmonised with EU standards. Adequate monitoring of these standards is also required.

Free movement of workers and services

As in previous enlargements, the prosperity gap between Ukraine and the EU will lead to intra-EU migration of workers under the free movement of workers and services. Around 15 per cent of the Ukrainian population fled the country in 2022 and 2023; a large proportion went to the EU. Under the Temporary Protection Directive, Ukrainian refugees were granted a special status in the EU compared with other migrants, including access to the labour market, education and housing.¹¹² The scheme has been extended several times and currently runs until March 2027. It is unclear whether these refugees will return to Ukraine after the war or instead generate additional inflow through family reunification. This will depend in part on the security situation, the extent to which control over Ukrainian territory and productive capacity can be restored, and the success of reconstruction efforts. Before the war, Ukraine's population was already declining as a result of emigration and a low birth rate; see Figure 21.¹¹³ In addition, around 6 million Ukrainians live in areas occupied by Russia. Figure 21 gives the figures for Ukraine within its 1991 borders.¹¹⁴

Figure 21. Population of Ukraine 1960–2024 (in millions)



Source: World Bank

Bilateral migration agreements existed between EU Member States and Ukraine before the war. Since 2007, an agreement has existed between the EU and Ukraine to facilitate the issue of short-stay visas, alongside a readmission agreement governing the return of persons who do not have the right to long-term residence.

As in previous rounds of enlargement, this intra-EU migration brings both advantages and disadvantages. These workers can fill gaps in the labour market, for example in agriculture or healthcare, in existing EU Member States. Possible disadvantages include additional pressure on services, wages and housing. This can be mitigated through transitional periods for the free movement of persons and services and further coordination of social security. Finally, effective supervision is needed to prevent abuse and exploitation. To this end, the labour authority must be provided with sufficient capacity.

Budget

With Ukraine, the EU would admit a country with a population comparable to Poland's and an economy at the level of Romania's. Assuming Ukraine's original borders, the Union's agricultural area would increase by 20–25 per cent. This has significant consequences for the EU budget, especially the cohesion and agricultural funds.

Given the limited size of the EU budget and the limits on its own resources, Ukraine's accession would, without reform of the current budgetary system, lead either to fewer EU funds being available for existing Member States or to new own resources, such as a higher contribution from the Member States to a larger EU budget. This requires choices that are already on the table in negotiations on the new Multiannual Financial Framework.

Estimates of the cost of EU enlargement differ. The Bruegel think tank calculates the cost, with unchanged budgetary rules and no transitional arrangements, at €136 billion in the 2021–2027 period. This amounts to approximately 0.13 per cent of EU GDP and therefore a relatively limited increase in the EU budget (around 1.5 per cent of EU GDP).¹¹⁵ According to media reports, internal Commission estimates assume €186 billion over seven years.¹¹⁶ The CEPS think tank refers to around €19 billion per year, comparable to the support already reserved for Ukraine for the next four years under the Ukraine Facility.¹¹⁷

In addition to a larger budget, reforms of the cohesion and agricultural funds are needed. Cohesion funds are intended to reduce economic and social disparities between EU Member States and regions. Given its prosperity level, Ukraine would be entitled to payments from these funds. Assuming the size of the funds remains unchanged, the question is then whether certain regions would lose their entitlement to payments or whether all other regions would receive less. The agricultural fund poses an even greater challenge because of the relative size of the Ukrainian agricultural sector and the fact that agricultural funds are determined partly on the basis of the available agricultural area. An internal Council study estimates that Ukraine would be entitled to €96.5 billion in Common Agricultural Policy funds over seven years, which would mean a 20 per cent fall in payments to existing Member States.¹¹⁸

Several nuances apply here. First, transitional periods can be set during which the new Member State has no entitlement to payments. This also happened in previous enlargements and is a negotiated outcome. Second, even without accession, the EU will have to provide substantial support for Ukraine's reconstruction in order to safeguard the stability of the country and therefore the region. Since the beginning of the war, the Netherlands has committed around €21 billion, of which €14 billion is military support and €6 billion is non-military support.¹¹⁹ The EU is already financing projects in Ukraine through the neighbourhood policy. These will become redundant with membership. Finally, the support should not be overestimated. Part of the Ukrainian agricultural sector is highly competitive on a global scale. EU investors, including from the Netherlands, have already invested in it for that reason in recent years. These, often large-scale, enterprises could possibly be excluded from support. This, too, is a matter for negotiation.

The Commission proposal for the 2028–2034 MFF already provides for budget reform, with a more flexible structure focused on core EU objectives such as competitiveness.

Governance

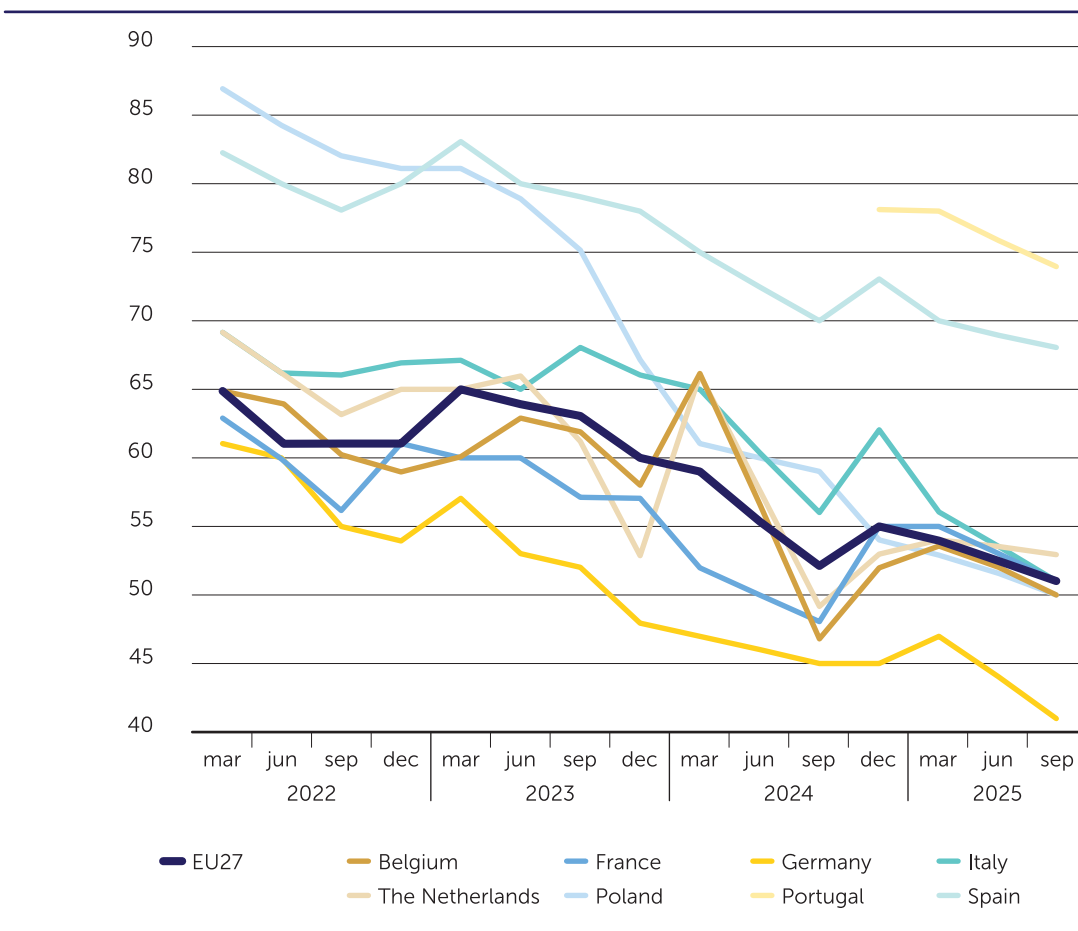
Finally, EU accession requires adjustments to the EU's working methods and institutions (governance). A new allocation of seats in the European Parliament is necessary, as is a limitation on the number of European Commissioners and policy portfolios, which will become increasingly unwieldy as the number of Member States rises into the thirties. Given its population size, Ukraine will carry significant weight in majority decisions and will have a veto right. This shifts the balance in the Council.

Public support

A 2025 population survey shows that 70 per cent of Ukrainians support EU accession, while only 9 per cent would vote against it in a referendum.¹²⁰ Forty-one per cent of respondents expect membership to be achieved within 15 years, compared with 14 per cent who think it will never happen. The EU enjoys relatively high trust (76%) compared with other international partners such as the US (55%).

Support for Ukrainian membership among current EU Member States is the highest of all candidate countries, at 51 per cent. Support differs between Member States, ranging from 41 per cent in Germany to 74 per cent in Portugal. In the Netherlands, 53 per cent of the population supports Ukraine's accession to the EU.

Figure 22. Support for Ukrainian EU membership 2022–2025 (%)



Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung *eupinions* (2005)

4.6 Conclusion

Ukraine is facing an existential threat. For a long time, it was viewed as a buffer state between East and West. After four years of war, in which the country has found itself not in the buffer zone but in the kill zone, that position is no longer tenable. Ukraine has unequivocally chosen alignment with the EU and NATO. Its security situation therefore presents the Union with difficult choices. While only Finland and the Baltic states currently border Russia, Ukrainian membership would extend the Union's border with Russia. The risk of a new conflict with Russia cannot be ignored. Even in the absence of a direct conflict, relations with Russia could deteriorate. Ukrainian EU membership would therefore increase the need for conflict management and deterrence on the eastern border. On the other hand, the risks if Ukraine were to lose the war or reorient itself more closely towards Russia are impossible to overstate. A more wait-and-see attitude, such as the one the EU and its Member States maintained in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea, was no guarantee for security on the European continent either. The inclusion of EU membership in the 28-point plan that Russia drew up together with the US in November 2025 indicates that Moscow accepts EU membership for Ukraine.¹²¹ It would be a way to stabilise the relationship between the EU and Russia and thereby lay the basis for a sustainable future relationship.

Accession also brings challenges outside the security domain. The country is large and, even without the war and the reconstruction challenge, remains economically far behind the EU average. Its economic structure, especially the large-scale and competitive agricultural sector, may lead to friction with existing EU Member States, as earlier experiences with the solidarity corridors for grain exports showed. The presence of Ukrainian refugees also creates fears about competition in the labour market, housing shortages and pressure on services. At the same time, Ukrainian accession offers opportunities in terms of access to raw materials and, in the longer term, energy security.

The reconstruction of a country, after years of war and widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, will require enormous effort. In addition to Russian reparations, the EU will also have to contribute. That contribution can be structured more effectively inside the Union than outside it. EU membership creates a more attractive and more predictable investment climate through the disciplining effect of EU legislation and access to the internal market. This will make it easier to attract private financing from the EU alongside public money. In time, a new market will emerge, with all the economic opportunities this offers the enlarged Union.

Ukraine still has to carry out substantial reforms in order to meet the Copenhagen criteria. First and foremost, this requires the implementation of the 10-point plan agreed between Commissioner Kos and the Ukrainian government. Despite the war, the country is making major progress in this regard. At the same time, however, it also has a tradition of corruption and state capture that casts doubt on the depth of the reforms. The challenge for the EU is therefore also substantial: after accession, the Union must remain workable and guarantee the integrity of the internal market and its fundamental values by preventing backsliding.

Conclusion and recommendations

5.1 The dilemma

In his speech to the World Economic Forum 2026, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney described current international developments as a *'rupture in the world order, the end of a nice story and the beginning of a brutal reality where geopolitics among the great powers is not subject to any constraints.'* In this changing world order, business as usual is no longer an option. Including for the EU. The Russian war of aggression and tensions in the transatlantic relationship have brought about a *Zeitenwende* – a fundamental turning point – which, although driven by far more negative circumstances, is comparable in significance to the shift that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall. Less than a month after the fall of the Wall, the Helmut Kohl government seized the initiative on German reunification through a 10-point plan and, in doing so, set the course for Europe. Here too, the EU can use the present momentum and support that have emerged to further shape the Union. The AIV takes the view that EU enlargement has a role to play in this process.

The review in Chapter 2 shows that previous enlargements of the Union have, on balance, been a successful instrument of European foreign policy.

- Security: EU membership provided a framework for managing sources of mutual conflict, such as the treatment of ethnic minorities, thereby strengthening the Union's internal stability. Although the 'big bang' enlargement increased the border with Russia, the current security situation in Europe would have been considerably worse without accession, given Russian revanchism.
- Economy: for the new Member States, EU accession led to economic and social transformation. For the old Member States, enlargement expanded the internal market and generated economic prosperity overall. Disadvantages, such as greater competition and the effects of the free movement of workers and services, can be limited through long transitional periods and safeguard clauses.
- Values and institutions: convergence in this area has proved the most difficult. Backsliding in the rule of law and Hungary's obstructionism dominate perceptions. Expectations that new Member States would fully fit the Western mould were unrealistic: such transformations take generations. Nor is the protection of democracy, a free press and the rule of law constant in the old EU Member States. Further guarantees can be included in the new generation of accession treaties.
- Twenty years after enlargement, the mental distances between East and West within the European Union remain considerable. The conduct of politicians such as former Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán or Slovak Prime Minister Fico shapes the debate on further enlargement. A Union whose centre of gravity shifts eastwards requires a reorientation, especially for countries such as the Netherlands, with its traditionally transatlantic outlook.

- During the 'big bang' enlargement, it proved impossible to carry out internal EU reforms before enlargement. The Treaty of Lisbon followed enlargement. This did not fundamentally impair the Union's capacity to act: reforms and enlargement can go well together. Obstacles in both processes often have the same domestic political or geopolitical causes. Prioritising reforms over enlargement offers no solution to the dilemmas facing the Union.

The AIV emphasises that EU enlargement entails risks. The new Union is being shaped under challenging circumstances: geopolitical conflicts involving Russia, China and the United States are unfolding simultaneously alongside internal challenges ranging from political fragmentation and populism to other policy issues demanding political attention, such as EU competitiveness, security, energy security and migration.¹²² The Union has traditionally been seen as an 'awkward geopolitical actor'.¹²³ The AIV acknowledges these weaknesses yet takes the view that they also exist without enlargement. Above all, they require reform of the Union itself.

The challenge lies in ensuring that reform and enlargement can proceed effectively together. More time provides more room to pursue internal reforms and gives the candidate countries more space to introduce reforms and embed them in society. But more time can also destroy the momentum for enlargement and EU reform and remove support in candidate countries for carrying out the necessary, but sometimes painful, reforms. Accelerating accession makes use of the current geopolitical momentum and gives candidate countries a clear perspective.

We seek to strike a balance between these competing considerations. There is no easy win-win situation: both EU enlargement and EU reform involve friction and come at a cost. Ukraine's security situation poses risks for the Union and requires investment in European security. Rule of law backsliding requires greater capacity for and political commitment to enforcing the EU's core values and maintaining a common foreign policy. Reforms, for example to the Common Agricultural Policy or the EU budget, also create resistance and require clear direction and the investment of political capital.

Taking everything into account, the AIV concludes that the costs and risks of a wait-and-see stance are higher. It is a glimpse into the future, with uncertainties about the extent to which different risks will actually materialise. A comparison with other forms of international cooperation is also difficult; as a form of cooperation, the EU has no equivalent anywhere in the world.¹²⁴ The risks of a wait-and-see approach are described in more detail below.

Security and stability

Candidate countries will see a decision not to enlarge, or to enlarge only in the very long term, as a broken promise. That will be particularly true if the decision is due to insufficient commitment within the EU to preparing itself through reforms. That risk also arises if the countries remain uncertain about their EU prospect for many years. The Union would lose credibility and influence. In a new world order that is increasingly shaped by spheres of influence, the influence of other actors, such as China, Russia and the US, will increase in these countries. This may happen through economic coercion and influence (China), disinformation and hybrid warfare (Russia), and direct intervention in democratic processes (US).

A lack of a clear prospect will lead to greater instability in the countries because of increased political and economic uncertainty. This could fuel nationalism and ethnic conflicts, and with them armed conflicts in what is historically a highly charged region. Such instability at the periphery will undoubtedly have significant consequences for the Union. Violence could spill over into EU countries in the region; instability and uncertainty could undermine the economy and may lead to more organised crime, with effects felt across borders. A wait-and-see stance

would also have an adverse effect on the Central and Eastern European countries that are already members. It would widen the distance between East and West in Europe.

Ukraine in particular, which has been invaded by its neighbour Russia, has an interest in a clear prospect of accession. It is no exaggeration to say that the outcome of the war will determine the future of Europe. A sustainable ceasefire and an end to the war are easier to achieve if any concessions go hand in hand with a tangible prospect of membership of the European Union and a force providing security guarantees (AIV, 2026). Material support, military support and political prospects should go together.

Economy and prosperity

EU membership and the safeguards of the EU acquis lead to a better and more stable investment climate. The economic development that Poland has undergone since accession is an undeniable economic success. Membership failing to materialise, further uncertainty, increased foreign influence and less clarity about a country's future course will lead to lower investment and more sluggish economic development (or reconstruction for Ukraine). This encourages corruption and the informal sector.

For existing Member States, the absence of membership mainly translates into lost economic opportunities from a larger internal market and investment opportunities. It also makes access to strategic raw materials more uncertain. In a time of geopolitical fragmentation, an enlarged internal market offers many advantages. Countries that are EU Member States are also obliged to participate in the design and implementation of the EU Migration Pact. Without membership, they have less incentive to contribute to it.

Values and institutions

If accession fails to materialise, there is a risk that the EU will lose its appeal as a community of values. Countries will tend to turn to other geopolitical actors, possibly with less democratic systems. There is a risk that the countries will take steps backwards in their democratisation process, whether or not through foreign interference. This too could spill over into EU Member States, particularly in Eastern Europe. Rejection of countries on the eastern flank may also be experienced as rejection in the Eastern European Member States, thereby increasing the East-West divide in the EU.

As the lessons from the previous enlargement round have shown, EU membership is no guarantee for lasting positive development in the EU's core values. Although many positive examples can be cited, experiences with politicians such as Orbán dominate perceptions. However, EU membership does give the Union more levers to encourage positive development. The further the EU prospect recedes, the fewer options the EU has and the greater the risk that reforms carried out so far will be reversed. At the same time, if the Council and the Commission are to be credible, they must be willing and able to act against backsliding. This requires reforms and additional safeguards in accession treaties.

Reforms and public support

The EU needs reforms (AIV, 2025). This applies both with and without enlargement. Enlargement can act as a catalyst, as it heightens the urgency for reform. Without enlargement, support for further steps in the EU may erode further if the perception that the EU cannot get anything done becomes entrenched. Although critics of enlargement often point to the lack of support for the Union, that very lack of resolve may further entrench the same feeling and shift the focus to internal (national) affairs. In an increasingly competitive world with more overt exercises of power, a lack of attention to international relations harms European and Dutch interests.

A closer relationship with the UK, Norway and Iceland, whether or not in the form of EU membership or within *coalitions of the willing*, could bring more balance to European cooperation and reassure the section of the public that is concerned about the shift in the EU's centre of gravity towards the east. The Netherlands can play a bridging role here, given its traditional partnership with the UK and the Nordic countries in European cooperation.

Conclusion

Enlargement gives both the Union and its existing and new Member States more room for action across all dimensions. Enlargement therefore makes the Union and its Member States more resilient. Even so, the choice to enlarge the Union carries risks, which have been mapped out in detail earlier in this advisory report and should be mitigated as far as possible in the process of phased accession through longer transitional periods. Having weighed up all the opportunities and risks, the AIV concludes that, with new Member States, the Union will in time be safer, more resilient and more prosperous, provided accession is properly phased and built on a solid foundation.

Recommendation 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.

5.2 Possible solutions

Based on the lessons from the past and the diversity of the candidate countries, the AIV distinguishes three categories among the current candidate countries:

Category I: Ukraine

The Netherlands should contribute to the conclusion of a peace treaty between Russia and Ukraine. The Netherlands and the EU can contribute to this in various ways. First, they can continue political and military pressure to move Russia towards the negotiating table and give Ukraine a stronger negotiating position. A sustainable ceasefire requires robust security guarantees and integration in the EU through EU membership. Both can help build support for a ceasefire. In the peace plan presented earlier (the 28-point plan), Russia accepted EU membership for Ukraine.¹²⁵

A sustainable ceasefire will create new momentum. The AIV recommends formally admitting Ukraine to the EU as soon as possible, for example by setting the objective that an accession treaty should be fully negotiated one year after a ceasefire has been reached. In the AIV's view, rapid accession is justified in light of the exceptional situation in which Ukraine finds itself and the implications this has for Europe. No European country has been so severely affected by external aggression since the Second World War. Russia will remain a threat both to Ukraine and to the EU even after the cessation of hostilities.

Despite the urgency, accession can only happen if the Copenhagen criteria are ultimately respected. Despite the war, Ukraine is making progress with the reforms needed to implement the EU acquis. The corruption scandals that have come to light show both that reforms are continuing and that a long road still lies ahead in tackling corruption. It may be that Ukraine does not fully meet all Copenhagen criteria one year after a sustainable ceasefire has been reached. The AIV considers this acceptable because the period between negotiating an accession treaty and actual accession can be used to implement further reforms. As an 'acceding country', Ukraine can already participate in meetings of the Council and the European Parliament during that period as an observer, without voting rights, and thereby gain experience with the EU and its working methods. The country is also assured of its future integration in the Union. Such an approach must be linked to a clear plan with a specific timetable. The joint 10-point plan of the EU and Ukraine of December 2025, setting out priority reforms, is a condition for this.

In addition, special conditions could be imposed for Ukraine. Ukraine faces a decade of reform and reconstruction. This creates scope for special conditions to be applied to funds and for longer transition periods than in previous enlargements. These periods would give reforms time to take root and are needed to secure support in existing EU Member States, for example in the areas of the free movement of workers and agriculture. Derogations may also be agreed: temporary exceptions in policy areas with which Ukraine cannot yet comply because it does not yet have the necessary administrative and financial capacity. Such derogations were also applied during the 'big bang' enlargement, for example in the area of environmental legislation. Given the scale of the reconstruction effort, Ukraine will probably make greater use of derogations than in previous enlargements.

An open question is what the status of 'acceding country' means for the EU. This status could continue for a long time if there are problems with ratification of the accession agreement in EU Member States. Under Articles 14 and 18 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, a state has an obligation, during the ratification period, to refrain from acts that would defeat the purpose

of the treaty. It seems likely that EU Member States would not respond substantially differently to renewed aggression before ratification than they would after ratification, but there are no guarantees.

The question of how the mutual assistance obligation will operate in practice is currently under discussion. The mutual assistance obligation in Article 42(7) TEU is not clearly defined at present. For the time being, it therefore remains unclear what the EU and its Member States are obliged to provide to Ukraine politically, legally, militarily and financially in the event of renewed Russian aggression, even with membership. The inclusion of security guarantees in a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine is therefore essential (AIV, 2026).

Under the Cypriot Presidency of the Council, the EU has begun to define this further through tabletop exercises.¹²⁶ One reason for this was the heightened security threat posed by missile strikes from Russia into Poland and from Iran into Cyprus, as well as the more uncertain security guarantee from NATO. The need to further define Article 42(7) TEU and to be able to provide independently for the EU's defence and deterrence exists regardless of membership. However, EU membership for Ukraine does increase the urgency. The need to support Ukraine politically, financially and militarily also exists outside EU membership. This undeniably entails risks, but so does the situation in which Ukraine is not integrated in the EU. The question is which risks the EU is willing to take.

In the period before a ceasefire is reached, the EU should, as far as possible, give further shape to Ukraine's future integration by:

- deepening the association agreements through further liberalisation of trade in goods and services.
- further integration in other policy areas, such as digitalisation, cultural heritage, regional policy, food safety, energy and trans-European networks.
- continuing EU support for Ukraine in the areas of security and defence through arms deliveries, military cooperation and the development of the defence industry. A large number of initiatives already exist in this area, both within and outside the EU through the broadest possible coalition of the willing.
- actively involving Ukraine in strategic security policymaking, given its experienced armed forces. This could be achieved, for example, by offering Ukraine a seat on a newly established European Security Council.
- Participation in deliberations in the Council and the European Parliament, as proposed by certain Member States including Germany, can further strengthen these forms of deeper cooperation.

If no ceasefire is reached, a new situation will arise in which the question of how Ukraine accedes to the Union will have to be addressed again.

Recommendation 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.¹²⁷
- 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.

Category IA: Moldova

Like Ukraine, Moldova faces the situation that part of its territory is disputed and not fully under government control. Transnistria, an administrative unit within Moldova, unilaterally declared independence in 1990 and maintains that position through the presence of the Russian army. That independence is not internationally recognised.

Moldova, located between Romania and Ukraine, has a complicated relationship with both the EU and Russia. Between 1918 and 1940, Moldova formed part of Romania. Approximately 60 per cent of Moldova's population also holds Romanian nationality. Transnistria, by contrast, was at that time part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and was annexed by Romania only briefly between 1941 and 1944. After the Second World War, the region became part of the Soviet Union. The continuing presence of the Russian army in the region serves in part to prevent the region from rejoining Romania. In 2022, 44 per cent of Moldova's population expressed support for reunification with Romania. Current Moldovan President Sandu has also expressed support for this.¹²⁸ In 2006, more than 97 per cent of the population of Transnistria voted in favour of joining Russia, although it should be noted that this referendum is not internationally recognised as valid.¹²⁹ Like Crimea and the Donbas regions in Ukraine, Transnistria therefore lies on the geopolitical fault line between Russia and the West.

Moldova applied for EU membership in 2022, in the wake of Ukraine, and has since been working on the necessary reforms. The country expects to be ready for EU accession in 2028. Moldova has politically linked its accession to that of Ukraine. Because of the Hungarian veto, the first negotiating cluster has therefore not been opened for either Ukraine or Moldova. It is for Moldova itself to abandon this political link. In terms of EU absorption capacity, considerably less friction is to be expected compared with Ukraine, given Moldova's much smaller size.

The security situation in Transnistria is less acute than in Ukraine, as there is no active conflict. The Russian presence in Transnistria remains a clear concern. Moldova may again become a target of Russia's revanchist policy; Russian drones regularly violate Moldovan airspace.¹³⁰ Russia is also attempting to destabilise the EU periphery through hybrid threats. In the longer term, the EU should strive for a new relationship with Russia. For now, Russia appears to be more concerned about possible Moldovan NATO membership than about EU membership.¹³¹

In addition to Transnistria, Moldova faces challenges such as crime and corruption, which pose a threat to the Union, including the illegal trade in small arms. This threat can be tackled more effectively through police cooperation within the EU than outside it.

The risk if Moldova is denied EU membership despite satisfying all the Copenhagen criteria is that the country will again come under greater Russian influence. This would destabilise the EU periphery and undermine security in Europe in the long term.

Recommendation 2A:

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.

Category II: Small candidate countries with reform momentum – Montenegro and Albania

The second category consists of small countries with a strong ambition to join the EU. That ambition is reflected in an extensive reform agenda, full alignment with the common foreign policy, and clear progress in the accession negotiations. Montenegro expects to meet all Copenhagen criteria in 2026 and Albania in 2027. According to Commissioner Kos, accession in 2028 and 2029 is feasible, depending on progress in drafting an accession treaty and ratification.¹³² In terms of population, Montenegro and Albania are comparable to Rotterdam and twice the size of Amsterdam, respectively. Because of their limited size, their accession would place relatively little pressure on the current Member States.

The greatest risk for these countries is backsliding. Areas of concern include corruption, organised crime, the rule of law and the lack of democratic pluralism. Such fundamental reforms always carry a risk of regression. That also applies to older Member States. The risk may be greater in countries with a relatively short tradition in these areas. Previous enlargement rounds showed that embedding democratic and rule of law reforms is a generational process marked by ups and downs. It is important to ensure that reforms introduced during the accession process take sufficient root and that reform momentum is maintained.

Given both the scale of the problems and the size of these countries, these risks can be adequately addressed through transitional arrangements and clauses in the accession treaties. The AIV advocates a new generation of accession agreements. The Commission announced something similar in its progress report on EU enlargement. The Commission states: *'To ensure that new Member States continue to safeguard and maintain their track-record on the rule of*

*law, democracy and fundamental rights, the Commission considers that future Accession Treaties should contain stronger safeguards against backsliding on commitments made during the accession negotiations.*¹³³ However, no new blueprint for such accession treaties has yet been presented. The Dutch government should urge the Council to discuss their substance soon.

Permanent unequal treatment between EU Member States is impossible under the principle of equality. This underlines the need to strengthen enforcement of the EU's core values in all Member States, both existing and new (see section 5.3). This too could be addressed through accession treaties by attaching a declaration of intent on EU-wide reforms accompanied by a clear timetable.

To keep the ratification of enlargement on track, it is necessary to improve awareness of these countries and the way in which they are connected to the European Union. The mental distance to these countries remains considerable, which may lead to distorted assessments of the opportunities and risks associated with EU enlargement. A fact-based dialogue is necessary.

Recommendation 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.

Category III: Remaining Western Balkan countries

The final category consists of countries that have been waiting for EU accession for some time, but where the accession process faces significant obstacles.¹³⁴ At present, this category consists exclusively of countries in the Western Balkans.

A first obstacle is that the need for reforms to meet the Copenhagen criteria is great, while the ability to carry out those reforms is lacking. None of these countries will be ready for EU membership in the foreseeable future. A greater stumbling block is the legacy of the wars and conflicts of the previous century. The normalisation of relations with Kosovo forms part of Serbia's accession negotiations. The architecture of the Dayton Agreement, with an autonomous Serbian region (*Republika Srpska*) alongside the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is currently obstructing decision-making in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bilateral disputes with existing EU Member States are also blocking progress. North Macedonia's accession process was long blocked by Greece's demand that the country change its name. Several EU Member States do not recognise Kosovo as an independent state, preventing candidate status from being granted.

Given the historical gravity of the conflicts, accession of these countries is not a challenge to be underestimated. Yet, just like the resolution of the conflict between France and Germany after the two world wars, it is possible in time and under the right conditions. During the 'big bang' enlargement, the EU showed its ability, despite setbacks and backsliding, to promote democratisation, the development of the rule of law and the safeguarding of minority rights in the former Soviet and Warsaw Pact countries.

The AIV sees accession as the best chance of structurally resolving the regional conflicts in the longer term by providing an overarching framework for cooperation. Or, in the words of one of the founding fathers of the EU, Jean Monnet: *'Cooperation among nations, however important, solves nothing. What must be sought is a fusion of the interests of European citizens, and not just the preservation of a balance between these interests.'*¹³⁵ This requires a proactive and pro-democratic stance from the EU, for example through open support for the Serbian student protests and a commitment to good governance and institutional reform. The EU must also play a more active role in conflict resolution in the region, including through the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹³⁶

EU membership for these countries is also in the long-term interest of the EU's own security, prosperity and values. Russia, China, Turkey, the United States and the Gulf states are all asserting their influence in the region. If the EU does not present itself as a reliable long-term partner, it will miss the opportunity to strengthen its internal market, expand its strategic autonomy, defend its values against Russian influence and disinformation, and thereby support regional stability and security.

Policy options

Building greater engagement and credibility requires time. For this category of candidate countries in particular, the AIV therefore sees added value in supplementary policy through which the countries are gradually tied more closely to the EU by deepening the association and free trade agreements, continuing existing initiatives such as 'roam like at home', energy cooperation and access to the SEPA area.

Greater involvement by the Dutch private sector is also essential. Examples include Schiphol supporting airport management in the region, Dutch energy companies helping to develop the energy transition in the Balkans, and the Port of Rotterdam establishing logistical cooperation with Adriatic ports. This creates mutual economic interdependence that anchors the integration process beyond the diplomatic sphere and gives Dutch businesses a stake in successful enlargement, helping to strengthen domestic support. Ministries other than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can also contribute more through assistance with policy reform, deeper integration in other policy areas and institution-building.

To protect the internal market during deeper integration, the principles of conditionality and reversibility must be maintained: stagnation or regression in reforms has consequences for progress in the accession process and for the rights acquired within it. For the AIV, full termination of the accession process must also remain an option.

In light of the above considerations, the AIV has serious reservations about the planned cuts to the MATRA-programme announced by the former Schoof government. This programme specifically supports rule of law and democratic reforms. Despite the limited size of these funds, restoring this budget would send a disproportionately strong political signal, because the Netherlands maintains long-term relationships through the MATRA-programme with local organisations, judges, journalists and civil servants.

Public support

Bilateral issues with EU Member States can undermine support for EU accession within the region. The EU sometimes places major demands on the table, such as constitutional amendments in North Macedonia, without guaranteeing that Bulgaria will lift its veto in the accession process. In September 2025, European Council President Costa presented a proposal to decide certain steps in the accession process, such as the opening of new negotiating clusters, by qualified majority rather than unanimity. Several Member States, including the Netherlands, opposed the proposal. A more streamlined proposal focused solely on technical interim steps would not eliminate the problem of vetoes but would speed up the accession process and thus shore up support for it. The Netherlands, together with like-minded countries and the Commission, can also exert diplomatic pressure on these countries to give priority to solidarity and common interests.

A clearer narrative based on mutual interest is crucial for support within the EU. The current momentum must be used. The AIV warns that a ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine could reduce the perceived urgency of closer ties between the EU and the Western Balkans. That would wrongly overlook other geopolitical threats, such as China's growing influence in the regional economy, for example in raw-material extraction in Bor and Majdanpek, the continuing hybrid threat from Russia and the risks of destabilisation at the EU's border as conflicts intensify.¹³⁷

Recommendation 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 preaccession support. Opt for an integrated approach involving all relevant ministries and the private sector.

5.3 Necessary reforms

In the Granada Declaration adopted by the European Council in 2023, the Member States stated:

*'Looking ahead to the prospect of a further enlarged Union, both the EU and future Member States need to be ready. Aspiring members need to step up their reform efforts, notably in the area of rule of law, in line with the merit-based nature of the accession process and with the assistance of the EU. In parallel, the Union needs to lay the necessary internal groundwork and reforms. This will make the EU stronger and will enhance European sovereignty.'*¹³⁸

The EU and its Member States therefore also have homework to do. In 2024, the European Council presented a roadmap for internal reforms and asked the Commission to prepare in-depth policy reviews along four strands: (1) values; (2) policy; (3) the budget; and (4) governance.¹³⁹ These policy reviews were expected by the end of 2025 but have not yet been completed. The government should press for their swift completion and, pending the presentation of the Commission's proposals, develop ideas for essential reforms together with like-minded countries.

The AIV makes several recommendations below, largely drawn from its recent advisory reports.¹⁴⁰ These recommendations were aimed at strengthening the Union in its current form but are even more relevant and urgent in a larger and more diverse Union after enlargement.

Governance

EU enlargement requires institutional reforms to keep the institutions functional, such as new voting weights under qualified majority voting, the extension of majority decision-making, the allocation of European Parliament seats to new Member States and a decision on the size of the European Commission. At present, each Member State has its own Commissioner, but after enlargement to more than 30 Member States this would hinder day-to-day governance. The number of commissioners can already be limited without treaty amendment.

Institutional reforms may seem technical, but they have a direct effect on the influence of the Member States and therefore lead to heated debates. Traditionally, the influence of smaller Member States has been a particularly sensitive issue, because they fear being outvoted by large Member States. On the other hand, it is sometimes difficult from a democratic perspective to justify relatively small countries with small populations being able to block decision-making for the entire EU.

Even apart from the 'small countries' issue, a larger Union with more diversity means a higher risk that a veto will be invoked. This exacerbates the existing problem in the Union, where Hungary in particular has been able temporarily to delay EU decision-making at crucial moments. Here again, enlargement does not create a new problem or a new need for reform but magnifies existing problems and the associated need for reform.

The governments of Albania and Montenegro have offered to temporarily waive their veto rights in order to facilitate EU accession. In the long run, however, such unequal treatment between Member States is not sustainable, and an EU-wide solution will have to be found. As a transitional measure, a temporary exception to the veto could be introduced for the period needed to implement internal EU reforms. Such a measure could be linked to a sunset clause to prevent reforms from being postponed indefinitely.

Values

In a larger and more diverse Union, the risk increases that views on core values and shared goals will diverge, undermining the Union's capacity to act, its reputation as a community of values and its internal cohesion. With a view to enlargement, proposals are circulating to impose more requirements on new Member States through accession treaties in order to prevent backsliding. The accession methodology has also been adapted accordingly by placing the fundamentals cluster at the centre of accession negotiations and requiring full alignment with the CFSP. However, an approach focused solely on new Member States fails to address the current problems and wrongly distinguishes between new and existing Member States. The AIV recommends that more should be done to protect these values independently of enlargement.

In its advisory report 'Decisiveness: EU Reforms to the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Budget and Rule of Law', the AIV recommends strengthening the current rule of law toolbox through more political dialogue, reform of the Article 7 procedure, greater use of budget conditionality and more backing for the Commission in infringement proceedings.¹⁴¹ The AIV advisory report 'The power of sincere cooperation in the EU' describes the political and legal toolkit for addressing undermining or conduct inconsistent with the principle of sincere cooperation.¹⁴² In 'Hybrid threats and societal resilience', the AIV argues for a whole-of-government approach to foreign interference, in which all measures from the EU Hybrid Toolbox are implemented at national level and links are sought with the European Democracy Action Plan and the Defence of Democracy package. The EU's toolkit in the field of economic security, such as investment screening, protection of critical infrastructure and cyber resilience, can also be applied in EU candidate countries.

Policy

Several EU policy areas require reform. Below, we highlight a number of reforms that are urgent without enlargement and indispensable with enlargement.

CFSP

In its advisory report 'Decisiveness: EU Reforms to the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Budget and Rule of Law', the AIV recommends shaping a new CFSP jointly through greater coordination and leadership.¹⁴³ A first step could be to develop more common strategies to give substance to the CFSP.

The right of veto also complicates a common CFSP (see under governance). The AIV recommends moving to qualified majority voting (QMV) where possible.¹⁴⁴ The new coalition agreement underlines this aim. Under certain conditions, decision-making by QMV can be introduced without treaty amendment.¹⁴⁵ Limiting the veto would already facilitate CFSP decision-making even without enlargement. EU enlargement and the geopolitical dynamics could act as a positive catalyst for necessary reforms.

Where a transition to QMV proves impossible, the AIV recommends taking further steps through enhanced cooperation within the EU or through cooperation in smaller groups outside the EU.¹⁴⁶ Examples include defence cooperation through PESCO (Permanent Structured Cooperation) within the EU and Dutch participation in the coalition of the willing for Ukraine outside the EU framework. In addition, the Union can support the CFSP through related policy areas where QMV applies, such as trade policy, as illustrated by recent trade agreements with Mercosur and India.

The CAP

The Common Agricultural Policy has been a contentious issue in all previous enlargements. There are strong arguments for reforming the CAP even without EU enlargement. The agricultural fund accounts for roughly one-third of the total EU budget and is primarily aimed at income support for agricultural businesses. While this support contributes to agricultural intensification and scale-up, it may have adverse effects on nature, the environment and landscape values. EU enlargement reinforces the need for reform. In many candidate countries, agriculture is economically important, but often not globally competitive – with the exception of Ukraine. However, the scale and strength of Ukrainian agriculture threaten to overburden the CAP. This can be addressed through long transitional periods upon accession.

Competitiveness

The Union must also strengthen its competitiveness outside agriculture, as emphasised in the Draghi and Letta reports. The AIV recommends investing in the further development of the capital markets union and industrial policy.¹⁴⁷ The E6 initiative is a positive development in this respect.¹⁴⁸ Investments in cohesion and unity remain essential for the Union.¹⁴⁹

Defence

In the long term, the EU must be able to independently ensure an effective deterrent and the security of the European continent. The larger the Union becomes, and therefore the greater the likelihood of reliance on the mutual assistance obligation in Article 42(7) TEU, the greater the urgency. The risk of confrontation with Russia has not been this high since the Cold War. The EU is insufficiently prepared for this possibility. Possible membership of Ukraine or Moldova makes the risk of confrontation with Russia even greater. Enlargement increases the need for EU reforms. The longer the border with Russia, the more urgent it becomes to strengthen deterrence on the eastern flank.

In its advisory letter 'More of Europe, less of America: shifting the balance in the transatlantic security relationship', the AIV makes a number of recommendations aimed at strengthening European security, defence cooperation and the defence industry.¹⁵⁰ The AIV advisory report 'Guarantees for security, a peaceful solution and a sovereign Ukraine', which is to be published in parallel, makes further recommendations in this area.

Ukraine offers the EU a great deal of knowledge and expertise from its experience in an active conflict. There are various ways to already involve the candidate countries in European defence cooperation, such as participation in EDIP (cooperation between EU defence industries), the EDA (the European Defence Agency), the EDF (the European Defence Fund), and joint procurement of major defence projects. The AIV supports the call made by the Netherlands together with the UK and Finland in March 2026 to that effect.¹⁵¹ In addition, the AIV advocates the establishment of a European Security Council to promote decision-making and strategic thinking in the field of security.¹⁵² As the most experienced fighting force in Europe, Ukraine would deserve a full place in it.

Budget

The AIV (2025a) recommends increasing the EU budget because of the new geopolitical reality and the related strategic challenges in the areas of defence, security and strategic autonomy.¹⁵³ This recommendation becomes even more urgent in the context of EU enlargement. The costs of EU enlargement as such are limited. The Bruegel research institute estimates them at 0.13 per cent of the Union's GDP (see section 4.5). Access to EU funds can also be limited for

many years upon enlargement through transitional periods. This also happened in previous enlargement rounds.

The costs of EU enlargement are separate from the contribution that the EU and its Member States will have to make, and are already making, to Ukraine's reconstruction. Since the beginning of the war, the Netherlands has committed around €21 billion to Ukraine, of which €14 billion is military support and €6 billion is non-military support.¹⁵⁴ EU membership provides more opportunities to influence how the money is spent. EU membership also provides a more predictable and certain basis for attracting private financing for reconstruction alongside public money. On balance, the costs are expected to be lower with EU membership, certainly in the longer term.

A larger EU budget can be achieved through higher national contributions or, where necessary, new sources of revenue such as common debt. A more flexible budget is also needed, for example through a shorter budget period, with greater emphasis on cross-border public goods such as defence.

Public support

Support among the EU population partly determines the capacity to admit new Member States. The Commission recognises this in its annual enlargement report and offers to assist Member States in public dialogue to ensure support for, and the democratic legitimacy of, the EU enlargement process.¹⁵⁵

The debate on EU enlargement in the Netherlands is still limited: the government, parliament and civil society all have a role to play here. Important lessons from previous enlargements require attention, including those relating to the free movement of persons, the unequal distribution of the costs and benefits of enlargement, the budget, agriculture, public support, backsliding and decision-making, as does bridging the mental distance with Eastern Europe. New challenges include security guarantees for the EU and Ukraine, on which the AIV is publishing a new advisory letter in parallel, and the issue of the many Ukrainian refugees currently residing in the Netherlands under the Temporary Protection Directive. The Netherlands should prepare these refugees better for their return through technical training.

Recommendation 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.

Endnotes

The sources are available in the digital version of this advisory report. For this purpose, go to:

www.adviesraadinternationalevraagstukken.nl

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Appendix I:

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Appendix II:

List of terms and abbreviations

ACER	European Union Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators
AIV	Advisory Council on International Affairs
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CEP	Centre for European Policy
CEPS	Centre for European Policy Studies
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CPB	Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Community
ECB	European Central Bank
ECOM	European Commission
EDA	European Defence Agency
EDF	European Defence Fund
EDIP	European Defence Industry Programme
EEA	European Economic Area
EEC	European Economic Community
EMU	European Monetary Union
EP	European Parliament
EPC	European Political Community
EUCO	European Council
EU	European Union
EUFOR	European Union Force
EULEX	European Rule of Law Mission
FPÖ	Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (Freedom Party of Austria)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
KFOR	Kosovo Force
MATRA	Maatschappelijk Transformatie Programma (Societal Transformation Programme)
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NBBU	Nederlandse Bond van Bemiddelings- en Uitzendondernemingen (Dutch Association of Recruitment and Temporary Employment Agencies)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OLAF	Office Européen de la Lutte Antifraude (European anti-fraude agency)
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PPS	Purchasing Power Standard
QMV	Qualified Majority Voting
SAFE	Security Action for Europe
SEA	Single European Act
SEPA	Single Euro Payments Area

SEO	SEO Amsterdam Economics
SPAK	Specialised Structure for Anti-Corruption and Organised Crime
TEU	Treaty on the European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UK	United Kingdom
UNMIK	United Nations Interim Administration Mission
US	United States
WGI	World Governance Indicator
WRR	The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy
WTO	World Trade Organization



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