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EU enlargement in wartime Europe: three dimensions and scenarios

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ABSTRACT

The enlargement policy of the European Union from 2013 to 2022 was not only ineffective, but also lacked an active enlargement drive. Russia's war in Ukraine changed the equation of costs and benefits in favour of new members and gave the EU a geopolitical incentive to restart enlargement. Enlargement is not only a geopolitical strategy, however: it also requires successful state-building efforts in the neighbourhood. Moreover, it is closely interlinked with the EU's internal development. This article analyses the current evolution of the EU enlargement policy as it emerges from the interplay of geopolitics, state-building challenges, and the EU's internal dynamics. Drawing on original interviews with officials, the paper also presents three scenarios for the coming decade. The paper concludes that to achieve its foreign policy objectives in the neighbourhood, the EU cannot continue 'business as usual' with enlargement. On the contrary, the policy of 2013–2022 needs to be replaced by a more effective model that encourages candidate countries to undertake genuine efforts towards democratic development. At the same time, reforms and compromises are required at the EU's end. Finally, the EU needs to better address the security needs of the applicant countries already during the accession process.

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1. Introduction

When Croatia joined the European Union (EU) in 2013, few would have guessed that the rapidly growing EU would suddenly close the gates of Brussels to new members for the next ten years and even shrink in size, with the United Kingdom leaving the Union in 2020. However, although Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey had all been granted a 'European perspective',¹ EU enlargement policy from 2013 to 2022 did not actively pursue enlargement. Instead, President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker declared in 2014 that he would rather focus on strengthening the EU internally (this remark, however, was not-so-aptly followed

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by the Brexit vote in two years' time) (Juncker, 2014; Schimmelfennig, 2015). The standstill led to decreasing motivation among the candidate states to pursue eligibility for membership. What had been known as the 'golden carrot' of membership conditionality – candidates implementing reforms to obtain membership – shrivelled in the absence of rewards (e.g. Bechev, 2022; O'Brennan, 2014; see also Schimmelfennig, 2023; Panagiotou, 2021; Börzel et al., 2017).

However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 changed the calculations on the costs and benefits of EU enlargement in EU capitals. When Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova (also known as the Association Trio) applied for EU membership just a few days after Russia launched its invasion, their applications were processed at record speed: Moldova and Ukraine were granted candidate status and Georgia the 'membership perspective' in June 2022 (see Żornaczuk, 2023). In the same summer, the decision to open accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia was finally made, and Bosnia–Herzegovina was also granted candidate status. Furthermore, Ukraine and Moldova, for their part, expect a Council decision to open accession talks in December 2023.

The war gave the EU a geopolitical incentive to reboot enlargement. Enlargement is not only about geopolitics, however. As both previous literature and the interview data of this research highlight, enlargement is also about state-building – a process in which the candidate countries adopt the EU *acquis*, create or strengthen the necessary state institutions, and implement reforms that improve the conditions for democratic governance and a competitive market economy, among other things. Furthermore, EU enlargement has implications for the Union's domestic development. It changes the EU's demographic, geographic and economic composition, influences its power balance and decision-making, and affects the distribution of resources within the Union. These changes need to be managed, and their management requires an agreement between the member states on necessary reforms and preparations. Hence, the geopolitical time pressure to enlarge as soon as possible is challenged by the reality in which reforms – both in the EU and in the neighbourhood – take time.

Enlargement will be one of the key issues on the EU's agenda in the next ten years (e.g. Miettinen, 2023). This article analyses the evolution of the EU enlargement policy as it emerges from the interplay of geopolitics, state-building challenges, and the EU's internal dynamics. Starting from the geopolitical dimension, the paper discusses the EU's past attempts at balancing between Russia and the Eastern neighbourhood,² as well as the implications of Russia's war and other conflicts for the future of EU enlargement. Secondly, it addresses the challenges related to state-building in the accession countries and the questions that the EU's internal developments pose for enlargement. Finally, drawing on this analysis, the paper presents three simplified scenarios of the Union's enlargement for the next ten years: one in which the EU is faced with an increasingly contested neighbourhood, one characterised by stalemate related to uncontrolled growth, and one in which the EU enlarges successfully. The analysis is based on interviews with officials and previous literature.

1.1. Data and method

The article draws on original interviews, conducted with officials representing the EU institutions, EU member states and applicant countries of the Union. Most of the interviewees

serve in leading or senior positions in their institutions, covering EU enlargement (or accession) in their current role. Most interviewees are affiliated with a ministry of foreign affairs or a diplomatic representation, the European External Action Service or the European Commission. The interviewees represent at least eight European states. The data set of this article comprises of 25 interviews and it was extracted from a larger data set.³ The selection of the data was guided by the research question: *Why is the EU enlargement policy changing, and what are the implications?*

The interviews were conducted as semi-structured or thematic interviews with a few guiding questions that were complemented reactively with specifying questions. Most centrally, the interviewees were asked to (1) assess the EU enlargement policy and method, including its limitations and impact, and (2) to share their analysis on and expectations towards the development of the policy.⁴ Each interview lasted approximately an hour. The interviewer took written notes during the interviews. The discussions were sensitive to some extent: they dealt with an ongoing policy planning process and commented on the positions of individual EU member states on the enlargement topic (see also footnote 3 on military cooperation). Several of the interviewees directly contribute to the planning of EU enlargement policies. To ensure that they could speak freely, without fearing any negative consequences, particular attention was paid to protecting their identity. Most centrally, the names or specific affiliations of the interviewees are not enclosed.

The data set was gathered during a time of change in EU enlargement policy and during an active phase of Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine. These factors shape the data, which captures a snapshot of the shift of the EU policies in wartime Europe. The interviewees also reflected the past successes and failures of the EU policies. These reflections also need to be interpreted in a context where Russia has already started its full-scale invasion in Ukraine and the EU policies have already started to change. A key limitation of the data is that only two applicant countries (Ukraine and Moldova) were represented by the interviewees. The fact that interviews were not conducted with officials from the Western Balkans might have led to a perspective bias in the analysis. On the other hand, the interviewees from the EU and the member states had often focused on the Western Balkans in their positions covering EU enlargement, since the Association Trio states were only recently added to that file.

The analysis of the data was conducted in the framework of qualitative content analysis methods (Berg, 1989; Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). The analysis focused on systematically identifying reoccurring statements and trends in the data, guided by the research question. The key reoccurring elements in the data were grouped and categorised and serve as the basis for the three dimensions and scenarios of enlargement presented in the following chapters. The analysis was partly data-led and partly theory-led; the key findings rise from the data, but they were analysed and conceptualised utilising previous literature. Individual interviews are not referenced, as it does not serve in answering the research question. The results draw on the data as a whole. Since there is no separate chapter for presenting the previous literature, references to aligned findings or connected discussions are provided alongside the results. Also references to speeches, documents and other complementary resources are provided in the footnotes.

The analysis of the interview data was additionally supported by a systematic round of background discussions with researchers (see annex 1). During these discussions, the author presented her initial results to the researchers that cover the same topic in their

scholarly work. The background discussions were used in the analysis of the data in two ways: firstly, limitations of the analysis were identified and potential biases addressed, and secondly, the expression of the level of certainty in the analysis was balanced based on these discussions.

2. Why enlarge? Three dimensions of EU enlargement

Based on the interviews for this research, the willingness of European states to join the EU should not be taken for granted. The UK decided to withdraw from the Union, while Iceland and Türkiye (de facto) have stopped pursuing membership, and Norway and Switzerland continue to stay outside. Similarly, both the Western Balkan and the Association Trio states host interest groups that are unwilling to pay the high price of EU integration. Economic cooperation with Russia seems more profitable to some in the short term than gradually removing barriers of trade with the EU. Some resist reforms that would cut their income and political influence. Despite this, for most candidate countries, EU membership is a long-standing foreign policy priority. This forms the basis of the EU's enlargement policies: the EU would not enlarge without the political will of the candidates to join it.

At the same time, the EU has no obligation to accept new members. After the 'big bang' enlargement of the Union in the early 2000s, a sense of 'enlargement fatigue' pushed the EU to seek alternative policy solutions to advance stability, democracy, and European integration in the neighbourhood. The Eastern Partnership and Association Agreements were drafted to tie the neighbouring countries as close as possible to the Union without promising EU accession (see European Union External Action Service, 2022). These policies were – and continue to be – frequently criticised for leaving neighbours in a grey zone, vulnerable to Russia's influence and aggression. Furthermore, the neighbours were arguably less motivated to follow the EU's vision for development without the membership incentive (see also Börzel et al., 2017).

Next, this paper delves into the three dimensions of EU enlargement that explain what prevented the Union from growing after 2013, why enlargement was rebooted in 2022, and why the change might not be as permanent as it seems – namely what could undermine enlargement in the coming decade.

2.1. Geopolitics with Russia

Based on the interviews, the geopolitical framing of EU enlargement policies primarily explains why the EU did not enlarge before the war and why it might do so after Russia started its war of aggression in Ukraine.⁵ According to the interviews, several EU countries resisted further Eastern enlargement of the Union because they prioritised bilateral relations with Russia due to foreign and security policy calculations, or for economic reasons.⁶ The assumption that further enlargement could trigger negative or aggressive reactions by Moscow led to ambiguity in the EU's support for the neighbourhood and to deprioritizing the integration and democratisation policies (see also Raik, 2022). In hindsight, the EU's cautious approach towards enlargement was not, however, particularly effective in containing aggressive policies: Russia still considered the political development of the neighbourhood a risk and aimed to control it by creating instability, frozen conflicts, and eventually a full-scale war.

Why and how did enlargement duly change from a geopolitical problem to a geopolitical tool or objective? At least three factors can be identified as having contributed to this development after February 2022. Firstly, European capitals made a strategic reassessment: the expectation that peace and security could be achieved in Europe without enlargement became questioned (see also Buras & Morina, 2023). As illustrated by the speeches of EU leaders during the first year of the war, the rhetoric shifted from considering enlargement a value-based endeavour to viewing it as an instrument to protect the EU's foreign policy interests (see e.g. European Parliament, 2023; Elysée, 2023).

Secondly, an attempt by Europe and the EU to remain relevant played a role as well: enlargement, in addition to other means, was seen as a feasible way for the EU to build a credible response to the war and to support Ukraine and other partners (Karjalainen, 2022). The EU was criticised (as often before) for not providing a robust enough response to the war, and the opening of the European perspective was one rather low-hanging fruit towards credibility.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the attempt to accommodate Russian interests in the neighbourhood ended with the war. The EU developed an extensive sanctions regime against Russia and started a multi-year programme to remove Russian energy from the EU market (see Siddi, 2023). Institutional and political cooperation with Russia ceased and trade diminished. This context provided the impetus for a shift towards neighbourhood-first policies, perhaps for the first time in history. The durability of this shift can, however, be questioned. The withdrawal of Russia from Ukraine or a compromise result to the war could potentially lead to some EU members rediscovering trade opportunities with Russia. If this scenario was to realise and risks were not managed better this time, it could hinder the member state-building agenda in the accession states.

Importantly, the interviews highlight that the strengthening of the EU's geopolitical incentive to enlarge will not diminish the effects of geopolitical rivalry in the neighbourhood – on the contrary, the EU's more geopolitical enlargement policy needs to be applied in an increasingly contested environment. Russia's attempt to control the neighbouring countries is also manifested in the conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. These frozen conflicts have become more urgent, and potentially also more complicated to resolve, with the membership applications of Moldova and Georgia. At the same time, Serbia and Kosovo, whose bilateral dispute is not without a geopolitical layer, remain on the brink of an armed escalation. EU conflict prevention and crisis management tools are in use in the conflict settings, but Russia's involvement in particular makes peace-building difficult. Some escalation scenarios can possibly be prevented by supporting local peace processes, but complete conflict resolution without Russia – or with an unreliable and aggressive Russia – seems unlikely.

According to the interviews, the conflicts are a major problem for enlargement: states with contested borders will find it hard to join the European Union, as many member states are likely to be hesitant about accepting them. While Cyprus joined the EU under a partial Turkish occupation, the interviewees for this research emphasised that the situation would be different today, and with Russian troops involved. Ukraine most likely cannot join the EU before Russian troops withdraw from its territory: the member states would consider the risk of getting involved in a direct military conflict with Russia too high.

Even the integration process itself requires a level of security and stability to succeed. What type of security guarantees Ukraine receives and whether it starts a NATO accession process simultaneously can shape the EU accession process and challenges along the way. In any case, given its limited military capability, the EU is unlikely to be the main actor providing Ukraine with security guarantees.⁷

Postponing difficult questions allowed the EU to grant Moldova candidate status with the Transnistria question unresolved, but it also seems unsustainable that Moldova would proceed with the adoption of the EU *acquis* leaving part of its territory non-reformed. There are also other unresolved political and territorial issues that have affected and will affect the enlargement process, including the problem that several member states do not recognise Kosovo. There are likewise unresolved historical disputes between Poland and Ukraine (see e.g. Kasianov, 2006), and Bulgaria and North Macedonia (see e.g. Brunnbauer, 2022), to name just a few examples of issues that most likely need to be addressed before the next enlargement.

Despite these challenges, EU enlargement is believed by the interviewees to contribute to peace among European states in general. Some pointed out that the Western Balkans could have been shaken by more numerous and active armed conflicts if the countries in the region had not been given a European perspective. Tying the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue to the EU membership process would be a good example of promoting peace as part of EU enlargement – but it would require the membership perspective to be credible and reliable.

2.2. EU member state-building

The state-building dimension of EU enlargement, on the other hand, provides another explanation for why the EU accession of Western Balkan states did not materialise during the past ten years. Furthermore, the interviewees were concerned that challenges with state-building could undermine the geopolitical relaunch of enlargement in the coming years. In literature, ‘state-building’ typically refers to international interventions establishing or strengthening state institutions in weak or failed states (Fukuyama, 2004; see also Chandler, 2007; Juncos, 2012).⁸ While most of the candidate states of the EU cannot be categorised as failed or even weak states (see Rotberg, 2003), the literature is helpful in conceptualising the challenges that the interviewees report the EU to face when promoting democratic reforms in the neighbourhood.

Candidate countries cannot enter the European Union without closing 35 negotiation chapters that concern the functioning of their state institutions, justice system, economic and competition policies, as well as energy, agriculture and foreign policy, among others (see European Commission, 2022, 2023). Closing the chapters cluster by cluster requires drafting and harmonising legislation, reforming and creating state agencies, developing standards of good governance and democratic rule, and fighting corruption. Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova have not yet started the accession talks, but they have implemented similar reforms to meet the Commission’s recommendations since June 2022 – and previously as part of their association agreements. The Commission’s enlargement package, published in November 2023, proposes that every applicant country still has a significant amount of work to complete to fulfill the membership criteria (European Commission, 2023).⁹

The interviewees significantly varied in their assessments about the ability of the candidate states to implement the necessary reforms. However, both the optimistic and the skeptical interviewees identified the same challenges in the process:

Firstly, reforming state-institutions and structures such as economy takes time, while the geopolitical framework would insist hurrying up the process (see also Schimmelfennig, 2023; Tamminen, 2023). While state-building and geopolitics seem to follow different timelines, compromises with regard to one might be detrimental to the objectives of both: Ignoring geopolitical factors might close the window of opportunity for state-building in the neighbourhood, but building state institutions in haste could undermine the foreign policy purpose of the process. In practice, interviewees referred to a risk that reforms are implemented only artificially in order to pursue the geopolitical motive of enlargement. At the same time, the geopolitical context was found to create challenges for state-building – democratic reforms in Ukraine have to be carried out under wartime circumstances.

The Commission's enlargement package acknowledges the circumstances in which Ukraine, in particular, has taken the first steps to meet the accession criteria after receiving the candidate status. While the report highlights the work yet remaining, its communication underlines the achievements made during the wartime and recommends opening accession talks with both Ukraine and Moldova. The positive tone and the proposed next steps seem to fit the purpose of responding to the war with the enlargement policy: too harsh an approach towards the candidates would not serve the geopolitical purpose of the turn in policy (See European Commission, 2023).

Coming back to the challenges ahead, secondly, the interviewees found the role of the EU (and the EU member states) challenging in the process. The interviewees believed that without an internal motivation and vision for reforms, the EU accession of the candidate countries is not feasible. Literature similarly emphasises local ownership and domestic control as keys to success in state-building (e.g. Kobzová, 2014; Grimm & Gross, 2013; Gordon, 2014; Zaum, 2012; Solonenko, 2009).¹⁰ However, as highlighted by many of the interviewees, EU member state-building¹¹ does not follow this model: membership negotiations are EU-led and EU-controlled from start to finish. Candidates need to adopt legislation that emulates the one in force in the EU, which could lead to a poor fit, limited practicability, resistance, and an increasing gap between formal and informal layers of governance (for problems of state-building, see Richter & Wunsch, 2020; Dandashly & Noutcheva, 2019; Nilsson & Silander, 2016; Moravcsik & Vachudova, 2003; Bickerton, 2009).¹² However, not all interviewees found the asymmetry as a problem: notably, several interviewees from the candidate countries emphasised that the one-sidedness of the process is accepted.

What many interviewees raised as a problem or a culmination of the lack of ownership is that the candidate states themselves cannot determine when they have completed the process – only the EU holds the power to decide that the 'building' is complete and to welcome new states into the Union. From the EU's point of view, this cannot be avoided: weak state institutions and problems with the rule of law in the candidate countries pose an existential threat to the Union (see Wyatt, 2023). The struggle with democracy and the rule of law in Hungary and Poland has led to an acknowledgement that it is easier for the EU to sanction and prevent the backsliding before accession rather than after it (see also Sedelmeier, 2014).

At the same time, many interviewees perceived the membership process to provide a unique momentum for democratic transition in the candidate countries (see also Börzel et al., 2017; Schimmelfennig & Scholtz, 2008; Freyburg et al., 2009). The membership process was believed to bind the governments of the candidate countries to at least some reform efforts. Some proposals were made by the interviewees to develop the EU's ability to support reforms, including more focus on the engagement of local civil societies in the process and more rewards during the accession process (gradual accession, discussed in the following sub-section). However, not all interviewees supported these ideas or considered them as particularly relevant.

2.3. Developing the European union

Finally, the third factor raised by the interviewees to explain the failure of EU enlargement during the past ten years stems from internal disagreements in the EU. The more members the Union hosts, the more diverse its membership will be in terms of national interests, historical experiences, economic structures and special characteristics of law and culture, which might pose challenges to cooperation. In one wording or another, several interviewees referred to the debate on whether the Union should grow in size or deepen integration among the existing members instead (see Kelemen et al., 2014; Hobolt, 2014; Schneider, 2014; Heidebreder, 2014). Based on literature, the two are not mutually exclusive objectives: previous waves of enlargement have catalysed EU reforms that enabled further integration (in addition to *ibid.*, see Freudenstein, 1998), but the EU member states are found to disagree on the topic (see also Miettinen, 2023; Bourgerie-Gonse, 2022, December 6; Von der Leyen, 2023).

The interviewees also referred to the EU's limited absorption capacity and discussed the topical policy initiatives to reform the EU institutions and budget to accommodate more members (see also Müller, 2023; Lehne, 2023; von Ondarza, 2022).¹³ They often highlighted that every new member means that there is a potential new veto player in the European Council and EU Council when decisions require unanimity.¹⁴ Several interviewees raised the expected economic challenge of integrating Ukraine to the EU, and in particular the challenge of absorbing Ukraine's agricultural sector into the joint policies.¹⁵ An additional factor in the EU reform debate is that the debate now takes place in a post-Brexit context, the consequences and reverberations of that process continuing to be unveiled from what researchers have named as the Brexit 'Pandora's box' (see Bailey et al., 2023; Bailey & Budd, 2019).

While the interviewees had varying assessments on the impact of the next enlargement round on the EU's ability to function, most interviewees were concerned about the ability of the member states to find a compromise on the needed EU reforms before the geopolitical window of opportunity for enlargement closes. The disagreement over treaty reform in particular could delay enlargement if a compromise cannot be reached in due course. At the same time, according to the interviews, there is new political will to overcome the disputes about the EU's future direction and to increase the capacity of the EU to grow, which was not the case before 2022.¹⁶

Some interviewees also raised the idea of a gradual accession as a way to sooth the way of new member states to the Union. Candidates could access the EU sector by sector, after having implemented reforms and harmonised the legislation involved. This

model of gradual accession would reward candidates throughout the process and facilitate deepening integration within the core of the EU while simultaneously integrating new members into the overlapping circles (see Emerson et al., 2021). The initiative is aligned with the recent revision of the accession methodology that divided the negotiating chapters into clusters (European Commission, 2022), but some interviewees noted that the cluster system could be further utilised to develop a gradual integration. The initiative also resonates with the renewed political and academic debate on differentiated integration that suggests that not all members of the Union need to cooperate to the same extent or integrate at the same pace in every policy area (see e.g. Klose et al., 2023; Bellamy et al., 2022; Siddi et al., 2022; Vinturis, 2022).¹⁷

3. Where to from here? Three scenarios for the coming decade

To simplify and concretise the analysis above, the paper distinguishes three scenarios of EU enlargement and envisions steps for the European Union towards each end-state. The aim of the exercise is not to argue that certain political decisions would automatically lead to these outcomes, and the roadmaps do not consider all factors and actors that affect developments in the EU's neighbourhood. Moreover, the exercise does not propose that the EU could be on the driver's seat in the development of the candidate countries: on the contrary, the EU can only support processes that are inherently domestic in nature. The exercise also sidelines the fact that a mixture of these scenarios – combining some elements of each – could be even more likely to materialise than any of the individual sketches. The objective, however, is to analytically delineate how the EU's action (or inaction) may contribute to the realisation of different alternative futures of enlargement, based on the analysis of the interview data.

3.1. Increasingly contested neighbourhood

Scenario 1: Increasingly contested neighbourhood. Some neighbouring countries stop pursuing EU accession and seek political and economic support elsewhere. The EU needs to cope with a more autocratic and less cooperative neighbourhood. Those neighbours that remain committed to EU accession are exposed to increasing regional tensions and interference, complicating their accession. The increasing Russian influence could re-escalate frozen conflicts or stir political unrest in the Western Balkans, Georgia, and Moldova, potentially causing regional spillover effects.

Roadmap to Scenario 1: Continue business as usual – namely the enlargement policy of 2013–2022. Enlargement of the Union is postponed so long that at least some candidates lose hope and interest.

Based on past experiences, EU candidate countries cannot rely on their European perspective – this notion reoccurred in the interviews. Enlargement is decided by the member states, and the EU institutions have no control over how EU enlargement will be viewed by the national governments of EU members in five or ten years. Several analysts have already labelled the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova as 'symbolic acts' (e.g. Matthijs, 2022). The symbolism might lose a connection to reality, as happened in the Western Balkans, where delivery of the European perspective has failed thus far due to lack of commitment on both sides.¹⁸

The following steps could contribute to this outcome:

- Some member states stick to a position that a treaty reform is a precondition for enlargement, while others oppose opening the treaties. Enlargement is postponed to maintain EU cohesion.
- After the war in Ukraine ends or cools down, some member states rebuild relations and rediscover possibilities for economic cooperation with Russia. The balancing between Russia and the neighbourhood creeps back into EU policies, leading to ambiguity and unclarity with regard to enlargement.
- Political and historical disputes between candidates and member states are not addressed, and there is no political will to find compromises in negotiations.

Simply put, the roadmap imitates the enlargement policy of the EU in 2013–2022.

What would follow from continuing business as usual with the enlargement policies? The interviewees considered that the Western Balkan states in particular can no longer be incentivized to continue implementing EU conditions with diminishing returns.¹⁹ Without the membership carrot, the EU's ability to promote democracy and the rule of law in these countries could decrease as other conditional instruments are not as effective. Assuming that other (such as internal) motivations to develop democracy in the candidate states are not strengthened, this could contribute to democratic backsliding.

Moldova and Georgia could increase their economic dependence on Moscow, if they are not integrated into the EU single market. Economic dependency in turn narrows their foreign policy leeway. Both states already host political forces that find political cooperation with Russia pragmatic despite its invasion of Ukraine. Russia can be expected to continue political, economic, and military interference to control vulnerable neighbouring states and to use the frozen conflicts to create instability, with negative security consequences for the EU. Hence, if this scenario materialises, the EU should prepare for a worsening security situation, backsliding democracy, and increasing instability on the European continent.

3.2. *The EU in stalemate*

Scenario 2: The EU in stalemate. The EU fails in the distribution of powers and resources among its growing and more heterogenous membership. Stalemates start to characterise its decision-making. The fight against corruption in the accession states fails, opening channels for foreign influencing over the Union's decision-making. The relevance of the Union decreases and members resort to smaller ad hoc groupings to cooperate on sensitive issues. The four freedoms are shaken by insecurity and uneven rules and standards in member states. Some member states withdraw from certain areas of EU cooperation due to a negative cost–benefit balance.

Roadmap to Scenario 2: The EU grows without reforming. New members enter the Union unprepared or experience democratic backsliding after accession. The EU does not reform its institutions, decision-making or budget to accommodate large but weak accession countries.

Based on past experiences, the EU also needs to consider the risk that the reforms adopted by the candidate countries to meet the membership criteria are not sustained.

The interviewees found the erosion of democracy and the rule of law in Hungary and Poland and the pendular progress in the Western Balkans serve as cautionary tales.²⁰ At the same time, Russia's war has increased the geopolitical urgency of enlargement, with candidate countries in particular pushing ahead with the accession process to seize the momentum. In this situation, they may be tempted to implement vital reforms artificially to demonstrate progress.

For example, Ukraine, which ranks low in global corruption indexes (Transparency International, 2023), has established a record number of state agencies, legislation, and strategies for fighting corruption in line with EU requirements (European Commission, 2023), but their implementation remains incomplete and institutional performance is uncertain in some cases. Unconsolidated or superficial reforms in the candidate countries could pave the way for backsliding in the future. Some interviewees pointed out that the international community could also fuel problems such as corruption in the candidate states with poorly designed support and aid strategies (also Grävingsholt et al., 2023).

Candidates joining the EU prematurely would come with several risks: the single market could be disrupted if the same rules and standards did not (really) apply in all member states; crime and insecurity could increase if some law enforcement agencies and courts did not respect the law; the EU *acquis* would lose legitimacy if arbitrarily adopted by corrupt governments and implemented with poor governance; and the decision-making could be blocked or influenced by hostile foreign powers through weak member states. These risks would increase if the reforms at the EU's end were to fail.

At worst, candidates joining the Union in haste could weaken the EU's fundamental values and those characteristics of the Union that made them want to pursue membership in the first place. Some interviewees assessed that older member states could react through security-driven and protectionist policies, seek other formats to cooperate on sensitive issues, or suspend participation or withdraw from some forms of EU cooperation that have become too costly for them. The following steps could contribute to this outcome:

- Monitoring the implementation of reforms in the candidate countries is not prioritised by local or international actors.
- The EU does not reform decision-making processes and member state representation in the institutions before the next enlargement round. Resolving difficult budget questions is postponed.
- Heterogenous and weak states are welcomed into the Union due to geopolitical pressure without adequate preparations.

3.3. *The EU enlarges successfully*

Scenario 3: The EU enlarges successfully. Europe becomes more peaceful and stable through EU enlargement. Candidates accede to the Union as stable democracies. Their vulnerability to external interference and internal distractions decreases due to stronger state institutions, economic stability, and clarity over their international position. The EU single market grows.

Roadmap to Scenario 3: Reform. The enlargement policy of 2013–2022 is replaced by a more effective model that supports the commitment of candidate countries'

governments to strengthening the rule of law, state institutions and democratic development in the neighbourhood. Old member states find a political solution for reforming decision-making rules and the distribution of resources in the Union.

The interviewees found the EU accession process as a unique opportunity to bind the governments of the candidate countries one after another to developing state structures, the rule of law and effective, democratic governance. Membership in the EU is expected to bring economic dynamism and growth, as well as decrease the risk of foreign interference. The big bang enlargement of the early 2000s demonstrated what widening can give the EU: more stability and democracy in Europe, assets for European security and defence policy, and economic opportunities. Most interviewees believed that achieving at least comparable results with the current candidates in the next ten years is possible. The following steps could contribute to this outcome:

- The member states reach a compromise on how to reform the EU so that it can accommodate a more heterogeneous membership – both in terms of GDP and political views. This is likely to include increasing the role of the qualified majority voting rule in the Council, the ‘phasing in’ of EU funds for the acceding countries, and a major reform of the EU’s agricultural policies.
- The credibility of the membership process is strengthened, for example so that it rewards the candidate countries for progress by granting access to funds gradually and to decision-making sector by sector (Emerson et al., 2021).²¹ Differentiated integration allows current members to deepen integration simultaneously.
- Local NGOs that exist to promote democracy and to fight corruption are extensively involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of reforms.
- The security risks and military threats that the candidate countries experience are duly addressed by the EU, NATO or other arrangements. Ukraine’s EU accession is secured through adequate security guarantees in one form or another. The European Peace Facility (EPF)²² can be used to equip partners while their armed forces are reformed, which allows for the mitigation of risks and the development of control measures. Peace mediation, conflict prevention and civilian crisis management are applied in post-conflict settings to support the investigation of war crimes, local reconciliation, and reintegration in the conflict-ridden neighbourhood.

4. Conclusions

This article has analysed the current shift in EU enlargement policies as an interplay of three dimensions: geopolitics, state-building efforts, and the EU’s internal development. After the EU losing one member instead of growing during the past decade, Russia’s war has increased the geopolitical urgency of enlargement in the EU and the awareness of the dangers of grey zones in Europe. Whether the EU succeeds in replacing the no-enlargement policy of the previous decade with an enlargement policy worthy of its name will depend on how each of these three dimensions develops.

The war has created a context in which the prioritisation of the neighbourhood and enlargement might succeed better than before in EU policies. At the same time, Russia’s continuing aggression may prevent candidate countries from joining the

Union. Ukraine's full political and economic integration requires the withdrawal of Russian troops from the country – and adequate security guarantees for Ukrainians in one form or another. Providing ongoing support for Ukraine's defence is therefore a crucial step towards supporting its prospects for EU membership in the future.

EU enlargement could, however, also be hindered by unsuccessful member state-building in the accession countries. The sustainability of reforms cannot be overemphasised as the key challenge: neither the EU nor the candidate countries can run the risk that incomplete, unconsolidated or superficial reforms and poor implementation will lead to democratic backsliding in the future. While the problem of local ownership seems impossible to fully overcome in the EU-defined accession process, the EU should take a back seat as far as possible, and the drivers of change must come from within the candidate countries. This is not to say that the EU has no responsibility – on the contrary, since the state-building map has been provided by the EU, it should be clearer and more trustworthy than the one used during the past decade. If there is ambiguity over the purpose of the journey, namely if the membership perspective is not credible, local advocates of change will find it hard to justify their decisions to citizens and political opponents.

Growing from a Union of 27 to one of more than 30 will fundamentally change the geographic and economic composition of the EU. Such expansion will also drastically alter the power balance, decision-making and distribution of resources within the Union. Fortunately, the EU does not need to navigate fogbound towards the next enlargement – on the contrary, lessons have already been learned to steer the process. The scenario exercise presented in this paper reveals that the EU should not continue with the 'business as usual' enlargement policy of 2013–2022 in order to achieve its foreign policy objectives in the neighbourhood. On the other hand, a change of course regarding enlargement also needs to be accompanied by reforms on the EU's side. Starting internal preparations early enough is essential to ensure that the geopolitical window of opportunity does not close before the EU is ready for enlargement.

Notes

1. The concept is used in EU terminology to signify that the country can become an EU member when it meets the accession criteria. Not all neighbouring countries have enjoyed this prospect; the Eastern Partnership programme for Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and three other neighbouring states indicated that membership was not envisaged for these countries.
2. Neighbourhood refers to those European states that are not EU members – Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye, Ukraine (not Russia). The focus of the paper, however, is on the countries that are pursuing EU membership.
3. The data was collected as part of a broader doctoral research project. The project centrally deals with EU enlargement but also covers other EU and member state policies on Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus, including military cooperation. The military cooperation topic required particular attention to protecting the identity of the interviewees, and the same careful policy was applied throughout the data gathering process.
4. Also other questions were asked, among others concerning the role of individual EU member states in the process, and the related results are presented in other publications.
5. However, some researchers studied the geopolitical turn in the EU's enlargement policies even before the war started, reflecting the endeavours of the "geopolitical Commission". See e.g., Petrovic & Tzifakis, 2021.

6. This observation also rose in a background discussion with Dr Susan Stewart and in another background discussion with a researcher who preferred to remain nameless.
7. Both earlier research (e.g., Gressel & Popescu, 2020) and the interviewees in this study have argued that the absence of credible security and defence cooperation, in particular, has weakened EU policies on the Eastern neighbourhood. For a recent take on the developing division of labour between the EU and NATO, see Raik, 2023.
8. A branch of literature applies the concept of “state-building” to analyze this dimension of EU enlargement policies. See e.g., Chandler, 2007 and Juncos, 2012. In EU enlargement studies, the concept of “Europeanization” has also been used to analyze the diffusion of EU norms and standards to the applicant countries. See e.g. Hughes et al., 2005 or Elbasani, 2013.
9. See also Stetsiuk, 2023; Ermurachi et al. 2023; Nizhnikau and Moshes, 2023; Emerson et al., 2023.
10. The key takeaway from that literature is aptly summarized by Bickerton (2009): “While state-building may aim, at least rhetorically, to rebuild independent states, in practice it is more likely to weaken state institutions, or at the very least build political structures that are dependent upon international support for their continued existence” (p. 122).
11. Some researchers have referred to EU enlargement as “member state-building” (Juncos, 2012; Woelk, 2013). The wording seems accurate in conveying the notion that in the enlargement process, the candidate states are being “built” primarily as EU members – in relation to the membership criteria, under the supervision of the Commission and following a timeline set by the EU.
12. As Moravcsik and Vachudova (2003) put it, “the requirements are massive, nonnegotiable, uniformly applied, and closely enforced” (p. 46).
13. Reforms are demanded to protect EU decision-making from stalemates, to support the functioning of the EU institutions, and to strengthen democracy at the EU level. The proposed amendments include increasing the role of qualified majority voting, decreasing the number of Commissioners, and restructuring seats in the Parliament. The difficulty of the reform process and the political risks involved have, however, made some member states oppose a treaty reform in principle. (Müller, 2023. See also Lehne, 2023; von Oндarza, 2022.)
14. New members would also change the balance of voting under the qualified majority voting rule, under which about 80% of EU legislation is adopted. See the Council of the EU (no date).
15. The challenge of Ukraine’s economic integration was also highlighted in the background discussion with Dr Daniel Szeligowski, not only in terms of accommodating the EU budget but also concerning the labour market and the implementation of EU standards in all sectors of Ukraine’s industry. Some analyses suggest that growing by nine members with an unchanged budget would give Ukraine 41.7% of EU funds. At the same time, Spain, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Estonia, and Cyprus would all transform from net receivers to net payers. (Bastasin, 2023.) Other studies argue that these estimates are exaggerated, and that Ukraine’s economic integration looks “manageable” (Emerson, 2023).
16. This issue was highlighted by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in her September 2023 State of the Union address, where she argued that “we cannot – and we should not – wait for Treaty change to move ahead with enlargement” (Von der Leyen, 2023).
17. See President Macron’s initiative (e.g. Caulcutt, 2023, August 28). See also several recent Horizon projects on differentiated cooperation: EU Differentiation, Dominance and Democracy (EU3D), Integrating Diversity in the European Union (InDivEU), and EU Integration and Differentiation for Effectiveness and Accountability (EU IDEA). The literature is not unanimous on whether the differentiation is likely to be temporary and lead to unified integration eventually (which would be referred to as a “multi-speed Union”), or whether the “islands of cooperation” are likely to be more permanent and potentially cause fragmentation.
18. See a recent take on the similarities and differences between the processes: Anghel & Džankić, 2023. See also Tamminen, 2023.
19. However, as mentioned in the Data and Methods section, no Western Balkan state representatives were interviewed for this research, so this should be interpreted as second-hand information.

20. While most interviews for this article were conducted just before the parliamentary elections in Poland, some interviewees mentioned that the election result could change the direction and “story” of Poland with this regard. In particular, the suitability of Poland to serve as a “role model” for Ukraine’s EU integration was found connected to election result.
21. EU instruments that already allow increasing cooperation with non-members could be utilized to support gradual integration. For example, Ukraine already contributes to the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy operations and missions and the EU battlegroups (Kempin, 2023). Candidate countries are also increasingly participating in the EU’s Interreg Europe Programme (Interreg Europe Joint secretariat, 2023, June 15), whose relevance for non-members was recently analysed in the context of the post-Brexit UK by McMaster and Vironen (2023).
22. The EPF is an extra-budgetary financial instrument allowing the EU to fund the delivery of lethal materiel to partners for the first time. It has been used during the war to fund weapon deliveries to Ukraine. See Karjalainen & Mustasilta, 2023.

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Annex 1

List of background discussions (names included based on written, informed consent):

Background discussion with Dr Susan Stewart in Berlin in October 2023.

Background discussion with a researcher who preferred to remain nameless in Berlin in October 2023.

Background discussion with Dr Daniel Szeligowski in Warsaw in October 2023.

Background discussion with Professor Andrzej Szeptycki in Warsaw in October 2023.

Background discussion with Dr Spasimir Domaradzki in Warsaw in October 2023.

(List of interviewees (25) is not provided to protect their identity.)