



## **EU Elections Series**

May 24, 2024 | Paper No. 9

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**Geostrategy**

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## **What's At Stake in the EU Elections: Enlargement Policy**

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# US-French Relations After the US Election

**By Florent Parmentier, Adam Hsakou | May 24, 2024**

*Dormant for the past decade, EU enlargement has regained strategic importance since Russia invaded Ukraine.*

The issue has returned to the forefront of European political discussions, with significant geopolitical undertones, after long being viewed as a “technical” matter involving legislation harmonization and structural funds management.

The EU Commission oversees the enlargement processes, and the European Council shapes its direction and concludes agreements. But the European Parliament (EP) also plays a pivotal role. It monitors the progress of candidates on implementing the EU acquis and gives its assent to final accession terms before any treaty is ratified. For that reason, the outcome of the approaching EP elections is of great interest to the nine countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, and Ukraine) currently holding EU candidate status.

## **Before June 2024: Enlargement as a Pivotal Issue**

Enlargement has costs, which, in a time of budgetary constraints, means it is a thorny issue.

Agriculture has always been an expensive—and sensitive—issue for the bloc. It is also a crucial consideration for Ukraine’s potential membership and one that has already had major political implications.

In a sign of its support for the country, Brussels removed tariffs on Ukrainian agricultural goods. The move, a harbinger of the impact of Ukrainian EU membership, sparked a crisis after European farmers, seeing prices fall as a result of perceived unfair competition, staged massive demonstrations. The conservative European People’s Party (EPP), the group expected to remain the largest in the next EP, capitalized on the situation during a March plenary vote. They vocally defended amendments that would impose restrictions on Ukrainian imports, including sugar, poultry, eggs, and cereals. Extremist voices fearing cuts in Common Agricultural Policy subsidies, especially in top recipient countries such as France, Germany, Poland, and Spain, also took advantage of the protests by promulgating in national discourse a narrative hostile to enlargement.

Beyond agriculture, the risk of fiscal and social dumping from integrating new member states is a key theme in EP campaigns. The far left and far right see the implications of Ukraine’s and Moldova’s low per capita GDP, about a quarter of the EU average, as a threat to jobs and wages. In contrast, centrists and liberals see opportunities for European companies to increase their competitiveness and achieve economies of scale.

Despite the challenges, EU member-state governments and civil society support enlargement due to the conflict in Ukraine. Recent [developments](#) in Georgia, impetus from Weimar Triangle countries (France, Germany, and Poland), and a 2025 Polish EU presidency that is sympathetic to enlargement make it likely the issue will remain a priority on the bloc's agenda.

This is encouraging since the European institutions have had a hesitant approach to bringing in the Western Balkan candidate countries, despite laying out the prospect of doing so at a 2003 summit in [Thessaloniki](#). This has tarnished enlargement's reputation as the EU's most effective foreign policy instrument.

### **Scenarios and Risks: What Happens After the Elections?**

A new European Commission will soon shape the EU, and the choice for enlargement commissioner will be a significant indicator of the importance the bloc attaches to expanding membership. Socialist members of the EP (MEPs) have accused the current enlargement chief, Olivér Varhelyi, a close ally of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, of supporting Serbian nationalist and separatist positions, thereby undermining membership prospects for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Montenegro.

The new commission must develop an "enlargement roadmap" that addresses the institutional reforms that enlargement requires. An expanded EU may need a new structure for the College of Commissioners, a limit on the number of MEPs, amending veto modalities in the European Council, and greater protection for the rule of law in member states.

The roadmap should consider:

- a cohesive approach toward Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, on one hand, and the Western Balkans, on the other, to avoid favoritism among candidate countries. For this, the adoption in the next two years of a bold multiannual financial framework for 2028-2034 that provides candidate countries with tangible support may well be decisive.
- preventing bilateral disputes between candidate countries by establishing external dispute settlement mechanisms. This will help clear the way for enlargement.
- not waiting for candidate countries to join NATO, as has often been the case. Alliance membership will be difficult for Ukraine. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Moldova, and Serbia also face significant obstacles. Still, to prepare for any EU enlargement, Brussels must demonstrate an ability to respond effectively to aggression and conflict by strengthening its mutual defense clause.
- refreshing the EU's carrot-and-stick policy to accelerate reforms in candidate countries. Georgia's recent adoption of the "foreign agents" law and Bosnia-Herzegovina's consideration of similar legislation is incompatible with EU principles. The bloc needs to stop democratic backsliding in its neighborhood. To do so, it should consider a process of "gradual accession" that could encompass interim financial and institutional benefits. These could include integration into specific sectoral policies, access to select European Council meetings, procurement of targeted funding, and greater freedom of movement for goods, services, and people.

- measures to prevent post-accession regression through, perhaps, a trial period during which new member are monitored and have limited veto rights. This would give the bloc time to complete institutional reforms while new members could use the period to build confidence in their bona fides.
- using ad hoc platforms to foster progress. Despite its informal structure and the lack of a political secretariat, the European Political Community, initiated in 2022, is a forum for strengthening ties among decision-makers from wider Europe.

The status quo, marked by EU institutional deadlock, could harm the prospects for the accession of new members. The conflict in Ukraine, the prospect of increased authoritarianism in Georgia, and the risk of destabilization in the Western Balkans all require Brussels to act to prevent a situation in which candidate countries face uncertainty and stagnation. That would lead only to opportunities for Russia and China to exercise their influence while EU cohesion weakens.

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### **About the Author**

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