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The Janus-faced geopolitics of the EU's eastern enlargement

Teona Giuashvili asks whether the EU's enlargement process could be derailed by the same geopolitical forces that revived it in 2022 and calls for strong security commitments to Ukraine and other candidate countries.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 induced a major discontinuity in the EU's foreign and security policy. It put an end to the EU's decades-long approach to Eastern Europe, which consisted of compartmentalising its economic and energy interests with Russia, for one, and its policy of democratic transformation and progressive integration of partners in the shared neighbourhood, for another. The EU assessed that it could develop its neighbourhood policy without seriously addressing the threats stemming from Russia – a policy that the war has proven incoherent and shortsighted.

Confronted with the return of imperialistic war to Europe, EU leaders proclaimed the “**geopolitical awakening**” of Europe and took unprecedented measures to support Ukraine, in close cooperation with the US and the UK. EU institutions and member states recognised that Russia's attack on Ukraine created a new geopolitical reality in Europe, requiring a redefinition of the European security order.

Within three months, EU member states **granted a membership perspective to Ukraine, Moldova and, subject to some political conditions, to Georgia** – the very perspective that had previously been denied, in practice if not in principle, to these countries. In other words, enlargement to Eastern Europe has been a geopolitical decision.

As such, it served multiple purposes. It was a tangible demonstration of solidarity to vulnerable partners, framed as an essential contribution to their long-term resilience. It was viewed as a response to the geopolitical challenges facing the continent and, therefore, as a key factor of European peace and security. And enlargement acquired **an existential meaning for the EU**,

constituting an integral part of the wider EU efforts to assert itself as a strategic or geopolitical actor in a continent destabilised by war.

Losing momentum

The recognition of the strategic importance of enlargement has unleashed relatively fast progress at the institutional level. In December 2023, the EU decided **to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and to grant candidate status to Georgia**. In June 2024, the first Intergovernmental Conferences were held with **Kyiv** and **Chisinau**. The division in 2024 between the portfolio of the Commissioner for Enlargement and the new position of the Commissioner for the Mediterranean clarified the allocation of tasks within the European Commission.

In February 2024, the EU eventually **agreed on the creation of the Ukraine Facility** (endowed with EUR 50 billion in grants and loans): a financing instrument to support Ukraine's reforms with a view to future membership. In October 2024, the European Commission **adopted a Growth Plan for Moldova** (EUR 1.8 billion) to support its reforms, attract investments and increase economic convergence with the Union.

It was clear from the start, however, that **advancing enlargement** required strong political resolve. Despite the important steps that have been taken, at almost three years since the launch of this new phase of enlargement, the process seems to be losing momentum. The enlargement agenda faces serious challenges and dilemmas. Some of them are not new, as they accompanied previous waves of enlargement, but have re-emerged with particular acuity in the current phase. Others are specific to this wave of enlargement.

Competing rationales

The first set of challenges stands at the nexus between the geopolitical and the transformative rationales driving enlargement. The expansion of the EU has always been a strategic exercise, but it took place in a relatively peaceful environment and was implemented as a technical process of normative approximation. The approach was, and remains, merit-based: progress depends on reforms in candidate countries.

The tension between strategic and normative considerations, however, is sharper now because of the external threats that candidates in Eastern Europe face, and because of their internal vulnerabilities. Ukraine is at war, Moldova's institutions are exposed to strong political interference and a risk of destabilisation, and the ruling party in Georgia has disrupted the EU accession process after clinging on to power through fraudulent elections.

In this context, striking the balance between the reform dimension and the strategic dimension of enlargement is a daunting task. While security is a condition for enlargement, the EU has made

clear that **there is no shortcut to accession**, which will still depend on completing reforms under extremely difficult geopolitical circumstances.

Deepening and widening

The second critical nexus at the core of the enlargement agenda concerns the balance and, according to some, trade-off, between the deepening and widening of the EU. As for previous stages of EU enlargement, the question is often framed as **the EU's absorption capacity** or the ability of the EU to continue functioning in an effective way while expanding. This concerns the impact of enlargement both on EU decision-making and on the EU budget and policies, such as the common agricultural policy or cohesion funds.

The question is particularly relevant today given Ukraine's relatively large population and economy. This debate is also linked to upcoming negotiations on the next EU multi-year budget – the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034 – and to the growing pressure on EU member states to invest more in defence and the energy and digital transitions.

Recent research, however, has shown that the costs of enlargement would be manageable, not least when considering the benefits. At the institutional level, innovative approaches to enlargement, such as the gradual or **staged accession** of candidate countries, provide a credible path to reconcile the need for candidate countries to deliver on their reform commitments and the requirement to manage the implications of enlargement for EU decision-making.

Internal crises and the return of Trump

A third nexus, between internal and external crises, is particularly relevant to the current EU enlargement agenda because challenges are proliferating both within the EU and at the international level.

It is difficult to keep enlargement high on the political radar at a time when political crises have engulfed major EU member states and weakened their government coalitions, nationalism is rising across the EU, fiscal strains affect policy priorities, and the new Trump administration threatens a trade war with Europe. The impact of President Trump's rhetoric and agenda extends well beyond economics. His dismissive attitude towards NATO and his intention to end the war in Ukraine as quickly as possible, while questioning further support for Kyiv, risk creating a new geopolitical context for EU enlargement.

This relates to broader strategic factors that clearly set the current phase of enlargement apart from the previous rounds. Never in the history of the EU has a candidate country sought to implement reforms while fighting a large-scale war of independence against the aggression of a neo-imperial power. Moreover, whereas previous rounds of EU enlargement to Eastern Europe were preceded by NATO enlargement, this prospect is very much in question today.

Both the US and Germany have declined to support NATO enlargement for Ukraine, and other NATO members may not be keen on the idea either. If during the Biden administration such a prospect was not completely ruled out for the future and could have also depended on the outcome of the war, the return of President Trump adds more uncertainty.

Statements by Trump and other top US officials suggest that the new administration sees Ukraine as a largely “European” problem. It remains unclear whether the Trump administration will provide rock-solid security guarantees to Ukraine after a potential peace deal. Europe now finds itself in a precarious situation, with war on the continent, hybrid warfare threatening EU countries and transatlantic relations shaken by the return of Trump to the White House.

The way forward

If the EU is serious on eastern enlargement, it will have **to take chief responsibility for credible security arrangements** to ensure deterrence and peace in Europe after a possible ceasefire in Ukraine.

Europe’s financial and military commitments would also be the best incentive for Washington to remain invested in the security of Ukraine and the continent at large, and a crucial requirement for pursuing the EU’s eastern enlargement. Alongside security guarantees, ramping up EU and NATO efforts to strengthen the resilience of partner countries will be critical to success, as recommended in the recent **report on civil and defence preparedness by former Finnish President Sauli Niinistö**.

By providing a firm and unambiguous response to the challenges it faces, the EU can affirm its geopolitical role, proving that it can outlast rivals and sustain the European integration of Ukraine and other partners in the region. Short of that, the EU’s eastern enlargement risks falling prey to the major geopolitical crisis that triggered it in the first place.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: **European Union***

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