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**Article**

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Intereconomics

*Suggested Citation:* Dabrowski, Marek (2022) : Towards a New Eastern Enlargement of the EU and Beyond, Intereconomics, ISSN 1613-964X, Springer, Heidelberg, Vol. 57, Iss. 4, pp. 209-212,  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-022-1064-3>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/262971>

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Marek Dabrowski

## Towards a New Eastern Enlargement of the EU and Beyond

During its meeting on 23-24 June 2022, the European Council gave the European Union (EU) candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. This decision went further than expected in early March 2022, when three Eastern Partnership countries – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – submitted their membership applications. At that time, given an enlargement scepticism in some member states, I suggested a political declaration that would confirm the eligibility of these countries to obtain a candidate status in the future, similar to the 2003 Thessaloniki declaration that started the EU accession of the Western Balkan countries (Dabrowski, 2022). It is good that the EU summit took a step further and granted two applicants candidate status.

The European Council also confirmed the eligibility of the third country, Georgia, to receive such a status “once the priorities specified in the Commission’s opinion on Georgia’s membership application have been addressed” (European Council, 2022). These priorities concern mainly the first pillar of the so-called Copenhagen criteria, “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities”. In particular, the European Commission (2022a) recommends further reforms to strengthen judiciary independence and the Anti-Corruption Agency; guarantee independent, pluralistic and professional media; ensure “de-oligarchisation” of the state and economy; and overcome excessive political polarisation. Sadly, in some of these fields, Georgia backtracked on the earlier reforms conducted in the 2000s and 2010s. Let us hope that the decision to leave doors open to obtain the EU candidate status later will mobilise the government of Georgia and its main political forces to rebuild political consensus concerning political and governance reforms.

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Open Access funding provided by ZBW – Leibniz Information Centre for Economics.

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### Delivering historical justice

After the collapse of the communist system and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the EU treated countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU) other than the Baltic states in a different way than Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). While CEE and Baltic countries could start the process of European integration in the second half of the 1990s (in 1997 and 1999) and become EU members in 2004 and 2007, the remaining 12 FSU countries were left in a sort of grey zone. The EU concluded partnership and cooperation agreements (PCAs) with them, similarly to other third countries. However, these agreements were not ambitious, politically nor economically (Dabrowski, 2014).

Launching the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004, just after completing the EU Eastern Enlargement changed little. The declared ENP objective was to avoid new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and its old and new direct neighbours as well as to strengthen stability, security and well-being in the entire neighbourhood (both eastern and southern). However, it offered few concrete steps towards a closer partnership. Furthermore, in the ENP Strategy Paper, the European Commission (2004) clearly stated that the ENP is not concerned with the subsequent EU enlargements, nor does it offer neighbours an EU accession perspective. It was the main weakness and central point of criticism of this policy framework (e.g. Milcher et al., 2007).

To address part of the critical comments concerning the limited offer of the ENP, the EU launched the Eastern Partnership initiative in May 2009. It was a supplementary cooperation framework (in addition to the ENP) aimed at deepening the bilateral and multilateral integration of six Eastern neighbours (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) beyond the original ENP design. It involved, among other things, the perspective of bilateral association agreements (AAs), including deep and comprehensive free trade areas (DCFTAs), close cooperation in various sectors, visa facilitation and (in the long-term perspective) visa liberalisation, and the launching of Comprehensive Institution-Building Programmes aimed at improving the administrative capacity of the Eastern partners (Council of the European Union, 2009). Eventually, it resulted in the signing of AAs and DGFTAs between the EU and Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in 2014, and their subsequent implementation. Citizens of the three countries may travel without visas to the EU:

citizens of Moldova since 2016, citizens of Georgia and Ukraine since 2017.

All three countries declared their geostrategic interest in joining the EU in the early or mid-2000s. They want to anchor their independence (against repeated Russian challenges) and the possibility of peaceful development in the Euro-Atlantic security alliances and the European integration system. They also seek external anchors (incentives) for their domestic economic, political and economic reforms.

AAs and DCFTAs between the EU and three Eastern Partnership countries have not differed substantially from the Stabilisation and Association Agreements between the EU and Western Balkan countries apart from one crucial detail – the lack of any perspective of EU integration.

Now, the decision of the European Council of 23-24 June 2022 eliminates this historical injustice and creates a new perspective for the region.

### Importance of membership perspective

The experience of the previous European Economic Community/EU enlargement rounds since the mid-1980s has demonstrated that the accession process offers a solid pro-reform and pro-modernisation incentive (Roland, 2002; Dabrowski and Radziwill, 2007). For the societies and political elites of countries that want to become EU members, the EU integration perspective looks attractive and is worth a serious reform effort for several reasons.

First, the EU is widely considered a club of prosperous, stable and democratic countries. Therefore, joining such a club is a synonym for a better life and the mark of the country's international nobilitation.

Second, membership in the EU means joining the Single European Market and benefiting from its four freedoms: free movement of goods, services, capital and labour. Some of these freedoms, notably free trade in manufacturing goods and part of services, are already available within the existing DGFTAs. However, full membership also means membership in the customs union and complete harmonisation with the EU internal market regulations.

Third, beyond the benefits of market integration, new member states, especially those representing a lower income per capita level, can enjoy a broad spectrum of intra-EU financial transfers related, among others, to a Common Agriculture Policy, cohesion and regional

funds, and more recently, green transition and the Next Generation EU.

Last, geopolitical stability and security are also expected upon completing an accession process. It was an essential argument in the case of the Western Balkans accession initiated in the early 2000s, after the decade of bloody ethnic conflicts in the region. And these arguments are even stronger in the case of the newest candidates. All three countries have been victims of the imperial policy of Putin's Russia through invasions by the Russian army (Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014-2015 and 2022) or by losing control over parts of their territories (Transnistria in Moldova; Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia; Crimea and one-third of Donbas in Ukraine, plus territories occupied in the current war).

For the EU, starting a new enlargement round provides a chance to broaden the area of socio-economic and political stability in Europe, help lower-income countries to catch up with the rest of the continent and minimise the risk of interference from other non-democratic powers and actors.

The decision of the European Council also confirms the credibility of Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, which says that "any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union."

Opening the EU accession path in an economic sphere allows consolidation of the existing economic ties between the three Eastern Partnership countries and the EU. The EU is their largest trade partner. In 2020, it accounted for 52.3% of the total trade of Moldova, 39.2% for Ukraine and 22.4% for Georgia. Trade reorientation towards the EU helped these countries, particularly Ukraine, after 2014 (Dabrowski et al., 2020), to neutralise the adverse effects of Russian trade protectionist measures against them. The EU is also a significant source of incoming foreign direct investment to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

In the case of war-affected Ukraine, granting the EU candidate status strengthens the morale and determination of its leaders, army and the entire society to resist aggression. Furthermore, it makes managing extensive assistance to this country easier, which will require further up scaling in the coming months.

### A long way to go

Everybody must be realistic. Granting the candidate status, despite its political importance, is only the beginning

of the long and technically tricky accession process. It includes the following stages:

1. opening membership negotiation
2. opening negotiation on each of the 35 chapters of *acquis* grouped into six thematic clusters according to the new enlargement methodology adopted in February 2020 (European Commission, 2020)
3. provisional closing of negotiations on each chapter
4. concluding membership negotiation
5. drafting and signing an accession treaty
6. ratification of an accession treaty by a candidate and all incumbent EU member states and entering the EU.

Moving to the next stage (opening membership negotiations), may take several years. While in the case of Croatia, it took only one year (from 2004 to 2005), Turkey had to wait six years from the time it obtained EU candidate status (1999) to start EU membership negotiations (2005). North Macedonia, which received EU candidate status in 2005, has been waiting 17 years to open membership negotiations (see below).

The European Council (2022) did not set a clear timetable for further integration steps for Moldova and Ukraine. It is only said in para. 12 that

The Commission is invited to report to the Council on the fulfilment of the conditions specified in the Commission's opinions on the respective membership applications as part of its regular enlargement package. The Council will decide on further steps once all these conditions are fully met. (European Council, 2022).

When looking at respective country opinions of the European Commission (2022b; 2022c), they specify several actions, which should be undertaken by parliaments and governments, and which will be subject to a detailed Commission assessment by the end of 2022. Negotiations can be launched no earlier than the first half of 2023.

The list of expected reforms is similar in both countries. It is primarily related to the first pillar of the Copenhagen criteria. It includes completing institutional reforms of a judicial system, including the process of merit-based selection and vetting of judges, strengthening anti-corruption bodies and their independence, strengthening free and pluralistic media and civil society, fighting organised crime and money laundering, further reform of public administration, and de-oligarchisation. According to the new enlargement methodology, most relate to the fundamentals cluster.

### Western Balkans and the credibility of an enlargement process

Pro-reform and pro-modernisation incentives can work only if the enlargement process remains credible and affordable for EU candidates. That is, if they remain convinced that they are welcomed as future members by incumbent member states, their accession speed will depend solely on the progress in adopting *acquis*. Otherwise, motivation to undertake difficult reforms, often against influential groups of vested interests, will weaken, and the entire accession process – will be derailed.

The experience of the Western Balkans region, whose EU enlargement process was launched almost two decades ago but remains far from completed, may serve as a warning signal (Dabrowski, 2020).

In June 2003, the EU summit in Thessaloniki expressed “unequivocal support to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries”; it also declared that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union” (Council of the European Union, 2003). Today only Croatia is an EU member. Four other countries (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) have EU candidate status. Montenegro and Serbia started accession negotiations in 2012 and 2014, respectively, but the process is slow.

The aforementioned North Macedonia has been waiting to start membership negotiations for almost two decades, becoming a hostage of regional politics. For many years, the delay in beginning accession negotiations was caused by Greece's demand to change the country's name from Macedonia. When this conflict was finally resolved in the Prespa Agreement of June 2018 and the politically painful ratification process of constitutional changes (caused by the change of name) was completed, North Macedonia expected to be rewarded with the opening of accession negotiations. However, it did not happen. First, France blocked the entire enlargement process demanding a new enlargement methodology. Then Bulgaria raised questions about Macedonian national identity and language, which required a new set of constitutional changes in North Macedonia. Other EU member states blocked starting accession negotiations with Albania, mainly for domestic political reasons.

### Enlargement and EU institutional reform

The EU also has essential homework to do to make the enlargement process successful. Once again, it must reform its institutions and decision-making process (the last reform was in the Lisbon Treaty signed in December 2007). Further expansion of qualified majority voting

(QMV) and reducing the list of decisions requiring unanimity is the most urgent component of such reform. Too often, the current EU becomes a hostage to individual countries' veto powers, for example, in the areas of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Multiannual Financial Framework or EU enlargement. Increasing the number of member states without fixing this problem would complicate the situation further.

In the area of enlargement decisions, the unanimity principle should remain at the beginning (granting the candidate status) and the end (accepting a new member upon completing membership negotiation) of the process. All intermediate stages, such as opening and provisional closing negotiations on individual chapters, should be subject to QMV based on the Commission's opinions. Such a change will ensure that the enlargement process is driven by merit-based criteria and minimise abuse of veto power for domestic political purposes.

The EU must also strengthen its law enforcement mechanism with incumbent members to minimise instances of reform reversal and anti-democratic tendencies. It may include a regular Commission's assessment of member states' records in the area of fundamental rights and the rule of law, more active use of infringement procedure in case of failure to implement EU law, strengthening competencies of the Court of Justice of the EU, etc. (Dabrowski, 2016).

It is not the first time in EU history that the enlargement perspective is confronted with the need for integration deepening. It was a frequent topic of debate in the 2000s, at the time of the Eastern enlargement. It is coming back now. However, the alternative debate about enlargement (widening) vs. deepening is wrong. The EU needs both: they are two sides of the same coin (Lippert, 2021).

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