

EU TALKS

Dialoghi sul futuro dell'Europa

ValEUs Edition

The Enlargement Process: Challenges and Prospects
Student Position Paper

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Executive Summary

This position paper presents the outcomes of discussions of the EU Talks roundtable on the EU enlargement process. Through four online meetings and a final in-person session, students explored EU enlargement from legal, political, and geopolitical perspectives.

The first meeting examined the accession process under Article 49 TEU, focusing on the Copenhagen criteria and their ambiguity. Participants discussed the tension between strict legal requirements and political considerations, given that enlargement is both a technical and a political process. The second meeting addressed the role of EU values in accession and the institutional challenges the EU faces ahead of the next enlargement. Issues such as democratic backsliding, “Copenhagen dilemma”, enlargement fatigue, and the need for institutional reform – especially to overcome unanimity voting – were central to the discussion. The third session featured Professor Iris Goldner Lang as a guest speaker, who illustrated how enlargement operates in practice at the intersection of law and politics. Real-life cases showed that Member States’ political interests often shape outcomes despite formal rules. The fourth meeting focused on the pros and cons of gradual accession models, allowing candidate countries phased access to EU benefits. The final in-person discussions highlighted the moderate financial costs of enlargement and the challenges of improving the CFSP in an enlarged Union.

Participants proposed five key recommendations:

(1) maintaining strict, merit-based accession criteria despite current geopolitical pressures; (2) strengthening the enforcement of EU values to increase the credibility of EU enlargement policy; (3) expanding gradual integration but making it conditional to meeting clear benchmarks; (4) reforming EU institutions ahead of enlargement, particularly by limiting unanimity; and (5) improving communication about the benefits of EU membership in candidate countries. Overall, enlargement is seen as a strategic priority that requires balancing political realities with the EU’s core values.

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Disclaimers:

This Student Position Paper reflects the collective outcome of discussions among participating students during EU Talks. It does not constitute an official position of the organising institutions, the ValEUs Project, or individual participants.

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Activity Report

The idea behind this roundtable was to discuss the current status of the EU enlargement process, its main problems, and possible solutions ahead. During a preliminary meeting held at the end of the opening plenary session of the EU Talks initiative, we discussed our **expectations** for the project and the topics we would like to cover. Based on this, we organised **four online meetings** covering different topics to explore the subject in greater depth from both legal and political perspectives. The coordinators provided students with background documents to read ahead of each meeting. They also organised a guest lecture featuring Professor Iris Goldner Lang, a specialist in EU enlargement with direct experience of Croatia's accession negotiations to the EU.

The **first online meeting** focused on the enlargement procedure, with reference to both Article 49 TEU and the steps that have emerged as a result of practice. We addressed the accession conditions and specifically the Copenhagen criteria, with the related historical background. Noticing the ambiguity of these criteria, we debated the difficult balance between strict accession requirements and respect for national diversity. We also reviewed the current negotiating chapters and clusters, reorganised after the 2020 accession methodology, the 2025 Communication on enlargement by the European Commission, and the inclusion of respect for EU values among the fundamentals of the accession process. There was significant interest in what it means to be a European state, and we discussed key cases such as Cyprus, Turkey, and Morocco. We also examined how accession involves both technical benchmarks and political choices. In this context, we discussed the importance for candidate countries to align with EU foreign policy in the context of geopolitical pressures. We also debated the opportunities and risks of future EU enlargements in the current geopolitical scenario.

The **second online meeting** focused on two topics: the role of EU values in the accession process and the impact of enlargement on EU institutions and their functioning. We examined the development of the Treaties concerning EU values (the introduction of Articles 2 and 7 TEU) and linked it to the prospect of the 2004-2007 enlargement. We then analysed the procedures under Article 7 TEU and their limitations to better understand the so-called "Copenhagen dilemma", meaning that the EU has strong leverage to demand compliance with values during accession but weaker tools afterwards. After the rise of rule of law backsliding, the Union now applies increased caution to ensure candidate countries uphold EU values. We also addressed the concept of enlargement fatigue and the impact of democratic backsliding on enlargement, along with the shift towards a new approach following Ukraine's application. Lastly, we posed the question "how can the EU balance geopolitical pressures for enlargement with fair and rigorous scrutiny of accession conditions?" and we discussed alternatives such as associated membership with phased market access and sectoral participation in EU programmes and policies.

In discussing the impact of enlargement on the Union, we moved from the Franco-German report on EU institutional reform to explore the need to go beyond unanimity in many fields, including

enlargement, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and Article 7 TEU. We also considered how a future enlargement could affect the composition of the European Parliament and the Commission, as well as the need to strengthen rule-of-law sanctions.

At our **third online meeting**, Professor Iris Goldner Lang (University of Zagreb) joined us as a guest. In her presentation, titled “EU Enlargement – Between Law and Politics”, she addressed three questions: (1) Is EU enlargement primarily a rule-based or a political process or both? (2) Should the EU prioritise strict conditionality or geopolitical urgency? (3) Does EU membership reduce sovereignty or transform and strengthen it?

These questions were explored through real-life cases: Slovenia’s blockage of Croatia’s accession negotiations due to border disputes; the delayed entry into the Schengen area of Bulgaria and Romania; the role of Hungary in opening Ukrainian accession negotiations; and Croatia’s decision to join the EU despite giving up part of its national sovereignty. These topics gave rise to a long and rich discussion. The participants and Professor Goldner Lang concluded that enlargement is a rules-based process, but its practical implementation depends on the Member States, the political context, and geopolitical urgency. Therefore, enlargement lies at the intersection of law and politics, and even if the decision-making rule were changed from unanimity to qualified majority (QMV), this fundamental character would remain.

"By joining the EU, Member States become members of a much larger and globally powerful entity to which they would otherwise have no access. Consequently, the transfer of national sovereignty pays back, as it is reciprocated by a significant increase of each Member State’s global political, economic and social power."

Goldner Lang, 2024

At our **fourth online meeting**, we wrapped up the main topics covered up to that point and went into further detail on the pros and cons of the gradual accession approach, debating models that grant interim benefits – such as internal-market access, observer status in EU institutions, or targeted funding participation – based on compliance thresholds. The group weighed benefits against risks, including premature market access, competition and fiscal pressure, corruption vulnerabilities, and geopolitical influence from neighbouring states. Students flagged the risk of a long-term “Norway effect”, as well as reversibility concerns if benefits proved politically and/or legally difficult to withdraw.

Ahead of the final event, we also organised an **in-person meeting** where we focused on the cost of enlargement and the relationship between enlargement and the EU’s foreign policy. The discussion on the budget drew on three studies by the Hertie School, Bruegel, and the European Policy Centre, which found that the accession of current candidate countries would modestly affect the EU budget.

In particular, Lindner, Nguyen and Hansum calculated that the accession of Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkan countries would lead to an additional total annual spending of only 19 billion euros on the EU budget.

As regards the CFSP, the discussion began with some students stressing the importance of reaching a common position within the EU on foreign policy matters. However, other participants suggested being realistic, as Member States are keen to manage their own international position and security autonomously. This triggered a discussion on the prospect of reducing instances of unanimity in CFSP and the political difficulties behind such a reform. The remainder of the meeting was devoted to organising the final event at Palazzo Vecchio.

Students' Proposals

1. Revitalising the accession process in the current geopolitical context

Since the last enlargement to Croatia in 2013, the EU has experienced a period of enlargement fatigue. In fact, the EU has even become smaller since the United Kingdom left the Union in 2020. However, recent geopolitical developments have changed that scenario, reshaping the dynamics of EU enlargement. In particular, the Russian war against Ukraine and the US's increasing hostility under the Trump administration have reinforced the strategic importance of further enlargement. In this respect, Ukraine's accession request marked a turning point. Since then, Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia and Herzegovina were granted candidate status in 2022, followed by Georgia in 2023. Furthermore, Iceland will hold a referendum in August 2026 on whether to resume accession negotiations with the EU, which have been suspended since 2015. These recent developments indicate that the EU has woken up from its enlargement fatigue and is pursuing a more active role.

The enlargement of the Union to Ukraine and the Western Balkans is a geostrategic investment crucial to the Union's long-term security. However, the geopolitical urgency risks conflicting with the EU's commitment to democratic standards and rule-based integration. The enlargement process needs to remain strict, fair, and merit-based, and the Copenhagen Criteria shall remain the core principles for access to the Union. The creation of a "fast-track" accession procedure, initially proposed for Ukraine, would damage the fairness of the EU enlargement and undermine trust among candidate countries. The candidate countries must implement reforms to ensure that their economic, institutional, and democratic systems are aligned with the EU's standards and values. Any weakening of the core principles of the Union for new Member States would undermine the legitimacy of the Union and its strong stance for democracy, human rights and the rule of law, both internally and externally. Maintaining a strict conditionality on the EU's fundamentals is essential to ensure that geopolitical considerations do not come at the expense of the Union's core values and long-term cohesion.

2. Enforcing values to increase the credibility of the EU enlargement policy

The values of Article 2 TEU, such as the rule of law, democracy and human rights, serve both as internal benchmarks for Member States and as conditions that candidate countries must meet to join the Union. There is, however, a gap between values as proclaimed in theory and their actual implementation in practice. Democratic backsliding in certain Member States was not properly addressed by the Union, as the (lack of) EU values enforcement was driven primarily by political considerations rather than objective decisions. This has reduced the EU's credibility and risks weakening candidate countries' commitment to respect accession conditionality. Candidate countries may indeed be less motivated to implement all the required reforms, especially those concerning the fundamentals of accession. Moreover, the failure to fully ensure respect for values within the EU itself may make citizens less likely to support the inclusion of new Member States, fearing further weakening of the system.

Reinforcing respect for values within the EU's borders, for example, by strengthening the infringement procedure and rule of law conditionality, is a key responsibility to which the Union is called upon to make the entire enlargement process more credible. These developments would help demonstrate to candidate countries that EU values are not just rhetorical but actually binding.

3. Boosting the gradual integration approach to the enlargement process

To increase the likelihood of accession for current candidate countries, gradual integration could provide a middle ground between full membership and the current slow pace of accession. Committed candidate countries should not have to wait until full accession to benefit from EU integration. Instead, they could gradually gain access to areas such as the single market and EU financial programs. However, this participation should be conditional and tied to meeting clear benchmarks, particularly in the rule of law and anti-corruption reforms. Another option is for candidate countries to participate in EU institutions as observers, without voting rights, before full accession. This would allow them to become familiar with EU structures without having full decision-making power. At the same time, we need to be aware of the risk that candidate countries are left in this intermediate stage for too long without reaching full membership, or that a sort of "Norway effect" develops, with candidate countries themselves becoming satisfied with participation in the European Economic Area and losing interest in full accession. While keeping this in mind, a gradual accession approach remains the best option the Union has at present for maintaining momentum on enlargement without compromising its rules and values.

4. Reforming the EU ahead of the next enlargement

Unanimity voting in the Council represents a major challenge to effective decision-making at the EU level. This is particularly true when it comes to the enforcement of EU values, the accession process

itself and CFSP, where the unanimity rule can trigger abusive veto practices. Therefore, we considered whether voting rules should be reformed in these areas.

The cases of Poland and Hungary demonstrate that even when procedures under Article 7 TEU are triggered, they often do not lead to sanctions, thereby undermining the credibility of the EU's scrutiny on respect for fundamental values. This is mainly due to political blocking and mutual protection between Member States. Removing unanimity in Article 7 TEU would strengthen the enforcement of EU values, but this could only be achieved through Treaty reform, which makes it politically difficult.

Enlargement itself suffers from strategic veto practices by some Member States, which require a shift from unanimity to QMV in the accession procedure. In the absence of a Treaty amendment, the use of unanimity should be limited to what is strictly required by Article 49 TEU. Indeed, even though Article 49 TEU provides for only two procedural points at which an actual unanimous vote is required (the decision to initiate enlargement and the conclusion of the accession agreement), the current accession process is, in practice, subject to several unanimous decisions by Member States (Hillion, 2025).

More broadly, if the issue of unanimity remains unaddressed, future enlargements could further complicate EU governance and weaken its internal cohesion, as more institutional actors could use their veto power to block political action. However, the unanimity rule is not the only institutional issue to be addressed ahead of further enlarging the EU. Future enlargements would also affect the composition of the European Parliament and the Commission, as additional Member States would require adjustments to representation and institutional balance. This suggests that institutional reforms are needed to ensure that both bodies remain functional and effective in a larger Union.

Finally, the difficulty of reaching a unanimous EU position on foreign policy suggests that decision-making in the CFSP should also be reformed ahead of enlargement. Given the political sensitivity of this area, which makes abandoning unanimity politically unlikely, intermediate solutions should be adopted: (i) introducing mechanisms to reduce abusive veto practices, such as an obligation to state reasons; (ii) moving from unanimity to QMV in certain areas of CFSP, but leaving the option of constructive abstention, which is a sufficient means to safeguard national interests without preventing the EU from reaching a decision.

5. Improving communication on the benefits of EU membership

Today, the Western Balkans face growing Euroscepticism and low expectations of joining the EU bloc in the near future, whereas the Eastern neighbourhood remains polarised between the East and the West. Given the strategic importance of EU enlargement, which promotes EU values and influence across the continent, better communication is key. Societies that are informed about the benefits the EU brings to their nations, both at present and upon EU membership, are indispensable

to favour pro-EU political actors who place the accession process at the top of their political agenda. Today, we can see the successful examples of Montenegro and Albania spearheading the process in the Western Balkans, with only a few chapters left, and Ukraine pursuing reforms despite fending off war against Russia. Nevertheless, ensuring the full accession of candidate countries requires clear communication from the EU about the benefits of integration, a point of particular relevance in countries experiencing democratic backsliding, such as Serbia and Georgia, where governments fail to provide effective information or simply refuse to do so.

Conclusions

In the current international context, enlargement is a geostrategic investment in the long-term security of the European Union. It is essential that the Union maintain momentum on enlargement, setting clear expectations for candidate countries without compromising its own values and rules. Therefore, this paper proposed five key recommendations: (1) maintaining strict, merit-based accession criteria despite current geopolitical pressures; (2) strengthening the enforcement of EU values to enhance the credibility of EU enlargement policy; (3) expanding gradual integration, particularly by offering candidate countries observer status and sectoral access to the EU internal market, but making this conditional on meeting clear benchmarks; (4) reforming EU institutions ahead of enlargement, particularly by reducing reliance on unanimity; and (5) improving communication about the benefits of EU membership in candidate countries.

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