

Policy Brief

EU Enlargement 2030: Leadership, Reforms and Strategic Decisions – Who, What and Why?

Context

Enlargement of the European Union is no longer simply a matter of incremental accession; it has evolved into a strategic imperative for Europe. The interplay of regional instability, global competition, energy and digital transitions and institutional transformation within the EU means that enlargement is at the heart of Europe's future trajectory. The 2025 Enlargement Package by the European Commission makes this clear: enlargement is *not* a distant aspiration but a genuine, realistic possibility provided if candidate and potential candidate countries deliver robust reforms and that the EU itself is prepared to absorb new members under stronger internal safeguards.

At the same time, the pace of enlargement has become central to its credibility. Uneven reform performance, stalled negotiations and prolonged timelines have fueled fatigue among both candidate countries and EU members, risking diminished public confidence and political will. The challenge is to sustain a predictable pace that reinforces trust on both sides.

EU enlargement is now both opportunity and responsibility. Success depends on the capacity to deliver reforms, align interests and adapt institutions – both inside candidate countries and inside the EU itself. Public sentiment is favorable, but momentum is fragile. Without focused leadership and credible delivery, the vision of 2030 may remain aspirational.

Key Issues for the Enlargement Agenda

Leadership and Institutional Ownership. Progress depends primarily on political will. Countries that advance foster long-term reform coalitions, reinforce institutional accountability, and cultivate societal trust in the European path. Likewise, the EU must maintain clear leadership by aligning enlargement with broader priorities – competitiveness, security, technological sovereignty, and rule-of-law reform. Leadership at both levels is the determining factor separating credible progress from stagnation.

Rule of Law and Institutional Reform. Rule of law remains the cornerstone of credible enlargement. Persistent challenges – judicial independence, anti-corruption efforts, depoliticization of public administration and media freedom – continue to slow progress across aspiring members. While reform agendas exist, implementation gaps remain wide. Durable institutional transformation is essential not only for accession, but for democratic resilience, investor confidence, and long-term economic convergence.



Economic Convergence and Competitiveness. The 2028–2034 Multiannual Financial Framework places competitiveness, innovation, cohesion and the green and digital transitions at its core. These priorities align closely with the needs of candidate countries. Enlargement offers economic opportunity for both sides: new labour force potential, deeper regional supply chains, investment opportunities and a more integrated single market. Candidate countries must therefore pursue reforms that strengthen productivity, enhance human capital and modernize industrial and technological capacities.

EU Institutional Readiness. A successful enlargement depends as much on internal EU reform as on candidate-country performance. The EU must adapt decision-making, strengthen budgetary frameworks, and refine rule-of-law safeguards to ensure institutional functionality in a Union of 30+ members. Enlargement cannot proceed without parallel internal adjustments that enhance coherence, efficiency, and resilience at the EU level.

Geopolitical, Security and Demographic Imperatives. Enlargement strengthens Europe’s security posture, reinforces its democratic neighborhood, and counteracts demographic decline. For candidate countries, EU integration remains the strongest anchor for institutional stability, economic modernization and societal resilience. For the EU, enlargement represents a strategic investment in long-term geopolitical stability and competitiveness.

Public Support and Civic Participation. Public support across Europe and the Western Balkans remains essential for the EU’s enlargement agenda, with generally high trust in EU institutions and growing pro-enlargement attitudes in many member states, though opposition surpasses support in several countries. In the Western Balkans, citizens continue to view EU membership positively, but visible integration fatigue—driven by slow reforms, political stagnation, and an unpredictable accession process—has begun to temper enthusiasm. Strong civic participation from civil society, academia, and the private sector is therefore crucial for sustaining transparency, accountability, and public trust. Together, public backing and active civic engagement form the foundation for credible progress toward the 2030 horizon, but both require ongoing reinforcement to counter rising skepticism within the EU and among aspiring members.

The 2030 Horizon as a Strategic Milestone. The 2030 timeline should be understood as a strategic benchmark rather than a fixed deadline. It establishes direction, mobilizes reforms, and anchors political commitment. Not all countries will reach accession by 2030, but substantial convergence in rule-of-law, competitiveness, governance quality and sectoral integration is both achievable and necessary. The strategic value of 2030 lies in its capacity to focus political attention and accelerate long-term transformation.

Policy Recommendation

For the European Commission and Member States:

- Integrate enlargement more firmly into the EU’s strategic agenda on competitiveness, security, digitalization, and climate resilience.
- Address public skepticism by communicating clearly the economic and geopolitical benefits of enlargement within member states where opposition exceeds support.
- Use the 2028–2034 MFF to finance institutional strengthening, rule-of-law reforms, and economic convergence in candidate countries.
- Modernize accession treaties and decision-making frameworks to ensure effective functioning in a larger Union.



- Reinforce monitoring mechanisms linking financial assistance and sectoral integration to measurable reform delivery.

For Candidate and Potential Candidate Countries:

- Prioritize credible rule-of-law reforms, including judiciary independence, anti-corruption systems, media freedom, and public administration modernization.
- Align national development strategies with EU priorities in competitiveness, innovation, green transition, digital transformation, and human capital.
- Address integration fatigue through transparent communication, visible reform progress, and engagement with citizens, especially youth.
- Strengthen regional cooperation and Common Regional Market initiatives as preparation for full participation in the EU Single Market.
- Promote reforms not just as conditionality — but as national priorities for sustainable growth, demographic stability, and social cohesion.

For Civil Society, Business and Academia:

- Enhance independent monitoring of reforms, institutional readiness, and absorption capacity.
- Promote public understanding of the EU's benefits through evidence-based communication, participatory dialogue, and outreach campaigns.
- Develop cross-sector platforms that support inclusive policy design and strengthen the societal foundations of reform.
- Counteract integration fatigue by fostering civic participation, community engagement, and long-term civic education.
- Advocate for transparency, inclusion and long-term institutional commitments rather than short-term political successes.

Who, What and Why?

Who. The success of EU enlargement toward 2030 depends on a shared set of responsibilities across EU institutions, member states and candidate countries. The European Commission and Council must ensure a coherent, predictable, and merit-based accession process while preparing the Union internally through institutional reforms and the new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF 2028–2034). At the same time, the governments of aspiring members – alongside independent institutions, civil society and the private sector – must deliver credible reforms, strengthen the rule of law, align foreign and security policy and build public trust. Enlargement requires joint commitment, because meaningful progress is only possible when both the EU and candidates fulfill their respective obligations.

What. Achieving progress toward accession requires governments to implement deep and durable reforms across the rule of law, judicial independence, anti-corruption, public administration, media freedom, human capital, digitalization, environmental sustainability and economic competitiveness. National reform agendas should align with the EU's evolving strategic priorities: security, energy resilience, innovation, digitalization and global competitiveness. Candidate countries should accelerate delivery under the Accession Process, the Growth Plan and regional initiatives such as the Common Regional Market, while the EU should modernize its enlargement methodology, reinforce monitoring mechanisms and enhance the link between financial support and measurable reform outcomes. These combined actions define the practical roadmap toward meaningful integration by 2030.



Why. These reforms matter because enlargement is now a strategic imperative for Europe – not just a technical exercise. A credible enlargement process strengthens Europe’s security, stabilizes its neighborhood, boosts economic resilience and reinforces democratic governance across the continent. For aspiring members, EU integration provides a transformative anchor that improves institutional quality, fosters investment, curbs emigration and accelerates economic convergence. For the EU, welcoming new members enhances its global standing, expands its internal market and ensures long-term demographic and economic vitality. Ultimately, credible progress toward enlargement serves the strategic interests of both the EU and its future members, contributing to a stronger, more stable and more competitive Europe by 2030 and beyond.

Conclusion

The convergence of geopolitical shifts, EU institutional reforms, and renewed public momentum has repositioned enlargement as a central strategic project for Europe’s future. If approached with determination, transparency, and shared responsibility, the 2030 horizon can generate transformative progress across the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova—regardless of the exact timing of accession.

Success will hinge on strong political leadership, credible reforms, sustained public support, and a more adaptive EU architecture. While full membership may not be achieved simultaneously by all, substantial integration and convergence by 2030 is both realistic and essential. A committed, well-governed, and strategically aligned enlargement process will help shape a stronger, more competitive, and more cohesive Europe for decades ahead.

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Highlights from Webinar:

Mr. Thomas Hagleitner: “The 2025 Enlargement Package shows that enlargement is no longer an abstract future, it is a realistic prospect in the coming years. Albania, Montenegro, Ukraine, and Moldova have set ambitious yet achievable timelines, and the Commission recognizes unprecedented progress. But enlargement must remain strictly merit-based: commitments must be implemented, institutions strengthened and the EU itself must prepare internally for new members. The credibility of the process depends on both sides delivering.”

Dr. Majlinda Bregu: “The rhetoric around enlargement may sound familiar, but the context is entirely new. The EU is undergoing profound transformation around security, technological sovereignty, competitiveness and energy, and the Western Balkans cannot afford to simply wait for chapters to open or close. Demographic decline, institutional fragility, and declining trust demand leadership that is serious, courageous and capable of building societal coalitions. The real question is not the exact year of accession, but whether we align now with Europe’s strategic agenda.”

Prof. Dr. Gordana Djurović: “For Montenegro and other frontrunners, the next phase is about ensuring that accession treaties reflect full equality and full rights within the Union, without creating second-tier membership. While the Reform Agendas and Growth Plan offer powerful tools, implementation remains weak and must improve dramatically. Political ownership of reforms, not merely EU encouragement, is essential. Montenegro is determined to accelerate the accession talks and finish it by the end of in 2026, but credibility depends on sustained delivery.”

Dr. Simonida Kacarska: “The Reform Agendas show a mixed picture across the region, progress where political systems are functional, stagnation where political blockages persist. Yet the Growth Plan demonstrates that targeted reforms can drive real movement in key clusters. The EU’s shift toward framing enlargement as a mutual benefit is welcome, but countries must prepare now for the substantial changes the EU’s pre-enlargement policy reviews will introduce. Ambition is necessary, but implementation must be realistic and durable.”

Prof. Dr. Tanja Mišćević: “To speak credibly about enlargement, we must confront the inconsistencies within the process. Negotiating under different methodologies creates unequal conditions between candidates. Full membership, as defined by the Treaties, must remain the only possible outcome, not staged or partial membership. At the same time, gradual sectoral integration can sustain momentum, but only if linked clearly to negotiation progress. The process must be coherent, fair, and predictable for all candidates.”

Dr. Alban Hashani: “Enlargement today is about more than chapters, it is about economic convergence, competitiveness, and the institutional capacity to deliver reforms. The Common Regional Market is not a substitute for EU membership; it is the region’s best preparation for the Single Market if treated as part of the EU path. With one citizen emigrating every two minutes, the region faces a demographic crisis. Only a credible EU trajectory can transform migration into circular mobility instead of a one-way exit.”

Prof. Dr. Adnan Efendić: “Bosnia and Herzegovina is well known with its institutional environment that is complex and often not inefficient enough, producing informalities, political instability, and supporting emigration intentions. EU integration offers an important external anchor strong enough to push forward desirable institutional reforms that domestic politics could hardly resolve internally. Investor and business confidence align closely with perceived progress on EU integration; political stability, institutional reforms and economic development must move forward together to achieve convergence with EU policy and standards.”

Prof. Dr. Kseniia Smyrnova: “For Ukraine, European integration is not a consequence of war, it is a strategic national choice that predates it. Despite the invasion, Ukraine continues to prepare for negotiations at the highest administrative level, even conducting simulation exercises. Enlargement requires dual transformation: reform within the candidates and institutional adaptation within the EU. Ukraine and Moldova must advance together, and the Fundamentals cluster remains our top priority as we move toward full membership.”

Dr. Liliana Cimpoeș: “Moldova has undergone a profound transformation, from DCFTA to candidate status to completing full screening and opening three clusters. Our goal is clear: close all negotiations by 2028 and join the EU by 2030. The challenges, justice reform, public administration, economic vulnerabilities and migration, are significant, but the public mandate and political determination are strong. The Growth Plan provides the momentum we need to accelerate reforms across all sectors.”

Prof. Dr. Fatmir Besimi: “EU enlargement has shaped the European project from its earliest days, yet after Croatia’s accession in 2013 the process has stalled despite remaining central to Europe’s agenda. Today, the geopolitical context, institutional challenges, and reform demands require us to think beyond technical compliance. Enlargement toward 2030 is not only a political vision, but also a strategic necessity, and understanding the leadership, reforms, and decisions required is essential for both the EU and the candidate countries.”

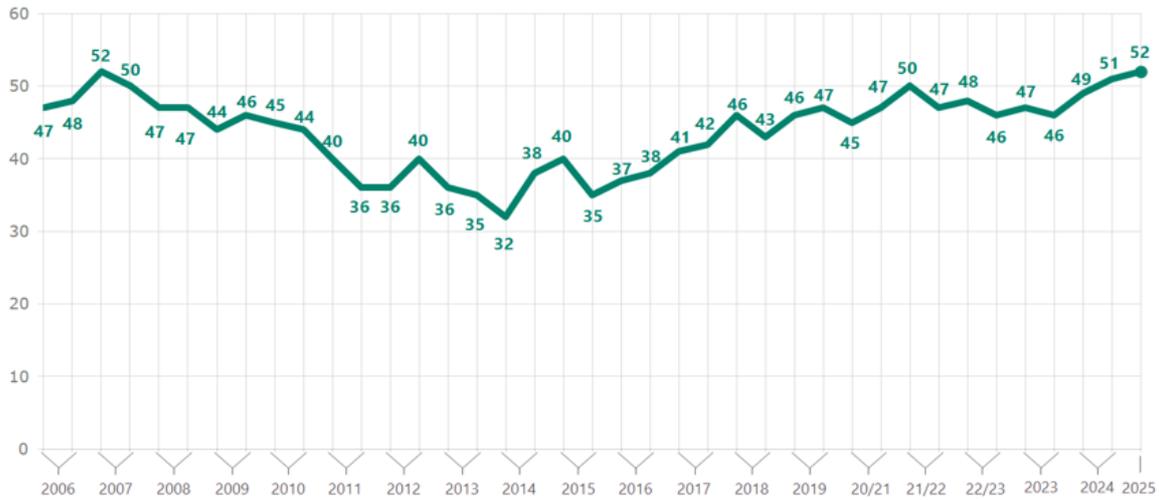
Disclaimer. Policy Brief reflects insights from the ongoing discussion and does not necessarily represent the views of participants.

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Annex

Graph 1. The trust of EU citizens in European institutions (in percentage)



Source: Eurobarometer Standard 103, Spring 2025 (European Commission).

Graph 2. The trust of EU citizens in Enlargement of the EU (in percentage)

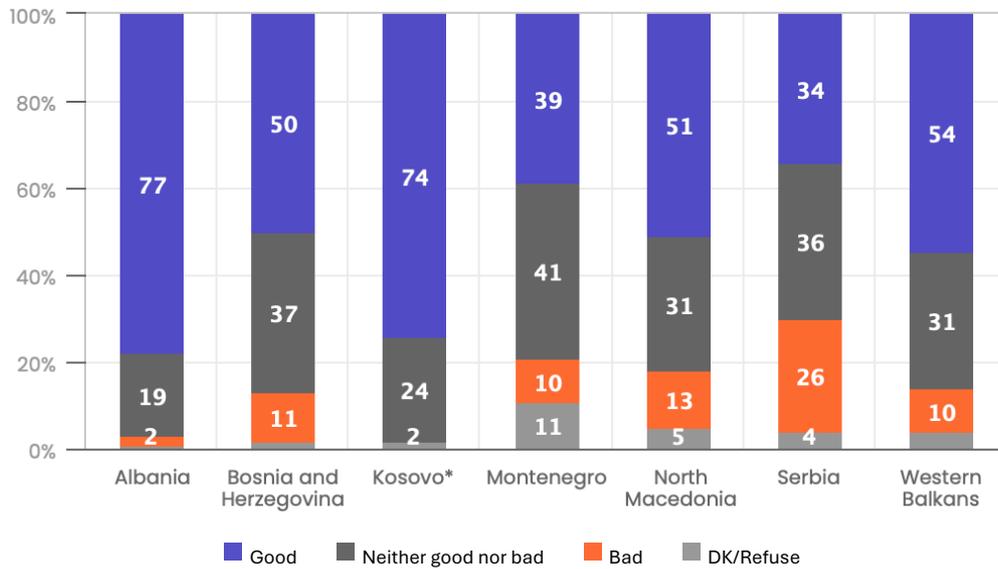
| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) |
|----------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| EU27 | 54 | 1 | 39 | -1 | 7 | 0 |
| EURO | 52 | 1 | 41 | -2 | 7 | 1 |
| NON EURO | 60 | -1 | 31 | -1 | 9 | 2 |
| BE | 51 | 1 | 46 | -1 | 3 | 0 |
| BG | 53 | -1 | 32 | 1 | 15 | 0 |
| CZ | 41 | -1 | 51 | -2 | 8 | 3 |
| DK | 62 | 7 | 30 | -4 | 8 | -3 |
| DE | 42 | -2 | 53 | 2 | 5 | 0 |
| EE | 56 | 5 | 36 | 1 | 8 | -6 |
| IE | 64 | 4 | 27 | -2 | 9 | -2 |
| EL | 54 | 4 | 40 | -2 | 6 | -2 |
| ES | 72 | -3 | 17 | 0 | 11 | 3 |
| FR | 41 | 4 | 49 | -5 | 10 | 1 |
| HR | 67 | 2 | 27 | -3 | 6 | 1 |
| IT | 58 | 3 | 38 | -4 | 4 | 1 |
| CY | 58 | 2 | 36 | -2 | 6 | 0 |
| LV | 67 | 1 | 25 | 2 | 8 | -3 |
| LT | 69 | -2 | 22 | 3 | 9 | -1 |
| LU | 49 | 8 | 46 | -9 | 5 | 1 |
| HU | 59 | -2 | 33 | -1 | 8 | 3 |
| MT | 68 | 7 | 26 | -3 | 6 | -4 |
| NL | 53 | 1 | 44 | 1 | 3 | -2 |
| AT | 42 | 7 | 53 | -6 | 5 | -1 |
| PL | 64 | -4 | 27 | 0 | 9 | 4 |
| PT | 70 | 20 | 20 | -17 | 10 | -3 |
| RO | 64 | -4 | 28 | 2 | 8 | 2 |
| SI | 62 | 3 | 33 | -3 | 5 | 0 |
| SK | 59 | -1 | 34 | -1 | 7 | 2 |
| FI | 56 | 2 | 36 | 2 | 8 | -4 |
| SE | 66 | 7 | 29 | -2 | 5 | -5 |

Source: Eurobarometer Standard 103, Spring 2025 (European Commission).

Note: 1. For (Mar/Apr 2025); 2. For (Diff. Mar/Apr – Oct/Nov 2024);
3. Against (Mar/Apr 2025); 4. Against (Diff. Mar/Apr – Oct/Nov 2024);
5. Don't know (Mar/Apr 2025); 6. Don't know (Diff. Mar/Apr – Oct/Nov 2024).

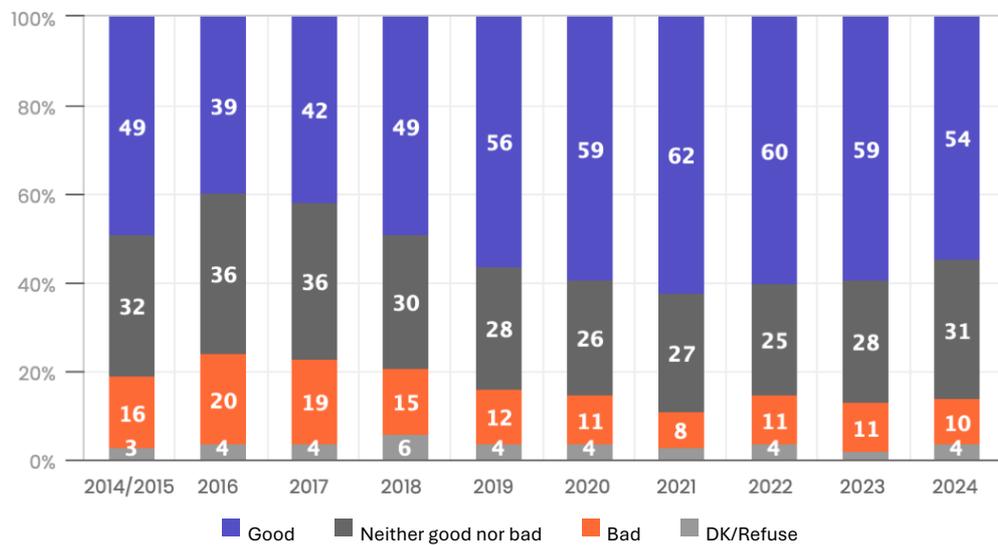


Graph 3. Citizens' opinion on EU membership in Western Balkans by countries 2024 (in percentage)



Source: Balkan Eurobarometer 2024 (Regional Cooperation Center).

Graph 4. Citizens' opinion on EU membership in Western Balkans 2014-2024 (in percentage)



Source: Balkan Eurobarometer 2024 (Regional Cooperation Center).