



The rise of radical right and Eurosceptic political forces and the impact on the EU's enlargement policy

Ioannis Alexandris

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Author

Ioannis ALEXANDRIS

Research Fellow, South-East Europe Programme (ELIAMEP)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This **think nea – New Narratives of EU Integration** report examines the growing influence of radical right and Eurosceptic political forces within the European Union (EU) and their implications for EU enlargement policy. As these parties continue to gain traction across member states, they are altering the political landscape and challenging the long-standing consensus on EU integration.

The analysis takes stock of the recent electoral victories of radical right parties, such as Georgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi) in Italy and Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV) in the Netherlands. These electoral results reflect a broader trend of rising right wing Euroscepticism, potentially posing substantial challenges to the EU's enlargement agenda. Key drivers behind this significant shift of the political pendulum to the right include public discontent with immigration, economic disparities, and a perceived loss of national sovereignty.

The report delves deeper into how these political dynamics could shape the bloc's decision-making processes, particularly those involving candidate countries pursuing EU membership. The radical right's scepticism over further enlargement raises doubts over the feasibility of integrating countries such as Ukraine and Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly in light of ongoing conflicts and political instability. Through a comprehensive examination of party manifestos, official statements, and expert interviews, this study identifies major patterns and trends among these parties with regard to their views on enlargement. It identifies the major enlargement-related concerns that may resonate with the public, hence influencing the EU's future trajectory.

Even though several of these parties, including VOX in Spain and the Sweden Democrats, have yet to form cohesive views on enlargement or take clearly anti-enlargement positions, the issue is likely to become more politicised in the coming years. This is largely due to its linkages with other areas of political sensitivity for these parties, including migration, fiscal policy, agricultural policy, and national sovereignty, all of which are fundamental to their agendas. Building on its findings, the report concludes that radical right parties share core thematic concerns shaping their views towards EU enlargement. These can be categorised into five main driving forces:

1. **Financial concerns:** Opposing the financial costs associated with the accession of economically less developed states is a recurring theme among these parties. For example, the PVV in the Netherlands supports a "frugal" economic position, arguing that admitting less developed countries would place undue financial strain on net-contributing member states. Similar concerns are echoed by the Rassemblement National (RN) in France, RN, AfD in Germany, SD in Sweden, and FPÖ in Austria, all of which represent net contributor countries concerned over further budgetary burdens.
2. **Migration and security:** Enlargement is also closely tied to migration and freedom of movement, which are key issues for radical right parties. The RN in its discourse often associates enlargement with increased illegal immigration and organised crime, a stance aligned with its broader domestic agenda. Both the AfD and FPÖ focus on anti-migration narratives targeting Muslim populations, while the PVV places more emphasis on cultural and social risks.
3. **Foreign policy:** Relations with Russia as well as concerns about geopolitical ramifications can also be a factor influencing the positions of these parties. The AfD's longstanding tolerant –if not favourable– stance toward Russia drives its

opposition to Ukraine and Moldova's accession. Conversely, Italy's FdI under Giorgia Meloni has so far adopted a pro-enlargement position, reflecting its broader pro-Western and NATO-aligned foreign policy strategy.

4. **Popular support and electoral strategy:** Public opinion and domestic political dynamics can also influence these parties' positions. In Austria and Germany, where public scepticism towards enlargement is significant, the FPÖ and AfD have aimed to capitalise on these sentiments to gain electoral support. Additionally, these two parties have sought to appeal to specific demographics, formulating narratives that resonate with their target voter bases.
5. **Concerns over EU functionality and sovereignty:** Finally, radical right parties often link enlargement to broader discussions about EU governance. They claim that incorporating new members would necessitate institutional reforms, such as a shift to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in areas such as foreign policy and tax policy, which they perceive as undermining national sovereignty. This could signal a departure from traditional anti-federalist methods that favoured enlargement as a counterbalance to deeper EU integration. Even though a shift to QMV could streamline decision-making, it might also exacerbate tensions among member states, providing fertile ground for radical right parties to amplify their Eurosceptic discourse.

The EU needs to navigate these complexities carefully, balancing the challenges posed by radical right parties with its broader goals of unity and expansion. The growing influence of these parties introduces complexities into the EU's decision-making processes. On the one hand, their scepticism can slow down or derail enlargement policy, particularly concerning Ukraine and the Western Balkans. On the other hand, their focus on sovereignty and national identity raises questions about the EU's integration model, potentially leading to alternative frameworks such as "multi-speed Europe" or associate memberships.

It is important, however, to mention that the dividing lines between support and opposition to enlargement among radical right parties are far from uniform. For example, Italy's FdI has adopted a pragmatic, pro-enlargement stance emphasising economic and strategic benefits, while parties such as the Netherlands' PVV and Austria's FPÖ maintain staunch opposition. Hence, a much more nuanced picture emerges from the findings, where radical right parties can be categorised as "supportive", like the FdI, "ambiguous", like VOX, and "against", like the AfD, when it comes to their EU enlargement position.

Overall, this report intends to serve as a resource for understanding the intersection of radical right-wing political forces and the EU's enlargement policy, offering valuable insights for policymakers involved in shaping the future of the EU in the coming years.

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Setting the stage

The rise of Eurosceptic radical right forces across the EU

This report takes stock of the growing influence of radical right and Eurosceptic political forces within the European Union (EU) and examines the implications for EU enlargement policy. By shedding light on the developments in a number of key EU member states the report aims to map the challenges that these dynamics are likely to pose for the rejuvenated momentum on EU enlargement and the prospects of an enlarged Europe.

In recent years, the political landscape of Europe has witnessed a notable surge in radical right Eurosceptic forces. For example, in November 2022, Meloni's radical right party, Fratelli d'Italia, and her right-wing coalition with fellow anti-immigration right-wing party Lega and centre-right Forza Italia, won nearly 44% of the vote. With Fratelli d'Italia having won up to 26% of the vote, its leader Georgia Meloni became the head of the coalition, promising to take a tougher bargaining stance with Brussels, to include the review and renegotiation of Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). This was the first time that a party affiliated with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in the European Parliament had taken charge of the Italian government; for Salvini's Lega, which is affiliated with the far-right Patriots for Europe (Pfe), this was its second time as a junior partner in a government coalition.

In November 2023, Eurosceptic populist leader Geert Wilders achieved a significant victory in the Dutch general election. After 25 years in the Dutch parliament, his Freedom Party (PVV), currently a member of the Pfe group in the European Parliament, secured 37 seats, outperforming the Green-Left coalition led by former Vice-President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans, which obtained 25 seats. The ruling conservative VVD and the newly established centrist New Social Contract (NSC) followed with 24 and 20 seats respectively. Following the announcement, Wilders proclaimed that "the PVV can no longer be ignored" and expressed his intention to govern. Wilders, known for his far-right ideology and opposition to Islam, has previously advocated for the Netherlands' withdrawal from the EU and cessation of support for Ukraine. After six months of negotiations, Wilders managed to form a coalition by abandoning his bid to become prime minister in March and agreeing to moderate some of his more extreme policies, such as banning the Quran and mosques. As a result, he saw his party entering the government for the first time in its history.

In addition to these cases, there are other countries where such parties have become increasingly prominent, including Sweden, Finland, Czechia and most recently Portugal, where the populist anti-establishment Chega ("Enough") party became in March 2024 the third largest in the country under the leadership of the former television sports commentator Andre Ventura. Ventura has garnered support from other prominent far-right figures in Europe, including Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini and Geert Wilders. In Austria, as things currently stand, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) is likely to lead the next government following September's parliamentary elections.

These electoral results indicate a broader trend across the continent, where radical right parties are gaining ground by capitalising on rising dissatisfaction with the political establishment, frustration over the rising cost of living, and growing anti-migration sentiment. To a great extent, this was also reflected in the European elections of 9 June 2024, where populist right-wing and far-right forces made significant gains.

At first glance, the European elections did not significantly shift the balance of power within the European Parliament, as centrist pro-EU parties (European People's Party - EPP, Socialists & Democrats - S&D, and Renew Europe) maintained their majority with 401 seats, which is enough to advance policies without needing support from parties to their right.

However, the election results have notably impacted national political landscapes across several EU countries more than they have the European Parliament itself. For instance, in France, President Emmanuel Macron's decision to call a snap election in June was a direct consequence of the EU elections, in which his coalition performed poorly, polling far fewer votes than the Rassemblement National (RN). The RN was ultimately outpaced in the second round on 7 July, after the left-wing bloc and Macron's alliance agreed to withdraw more than 200 of their candidates to avoid splitting the vote and decreasing the likelihood of the Far Right taking power. Nevertheless, the RN led the first round with 34% of the vote, nearly doubling its 18% first-round performance from 2022.

A major development in the new European Parliament is the formation of the new far-right Patriots for Europe PfE group and of the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) group. Including former members of the Identity & Democracy (ID) group and the Hungarian Fidesz party led by Viktor Orbán, the PfE became the third-largest group in the European Parliament with 84 MEPs. Furthermore, the right-wing soft Eurosceptic ECR also overtook the centrist Renew Europe group, which dropped to fifth place from third. In the previous European Parliament, the two Eurosceptic right-wing parliamentary groups held a total of 118 seats; however, in the new Parliament, there are three such parliamentary groups with a combined total of 188 seats, which is just one seat short of the EPP group.

The current seat distribution is as follows:

Name of political party in European Parliament	Number of seats
European People's Party – EPP	188
Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats – S&D	136
Patriots for Europe — PfE	84
European Conservatives and Reformists – ECR	78
Renew Europe	77
Group of Greens	53
The Left Group in the European Parliament – GUE/NGL	46
Europe of Sovereign Nations – ESN	25
Non-attached members	33

Defining the radical right and Eurosceptic challenge

Before delving deeper into these cases, it is important to clarify the definitions of political parties that position themselves to the right of the mainstream centre-right on the political spectrum. These parties are often labelled with a variety of terms in the media, including 'hard-right,' 'radical right,' 'far-right,' 'nativist right,' 'extreme right,' and 'populist right'. These labels are frequently used interchangeably, which can lead to confusion. However, according to the scholarly literature, a distinction can be made between 'radical right' and 'extreme right' parties.¹

Extreme right parties are characterised by their fundamentally illiberal and undemocratic nature and often reject core democratic principles. Radical right parties, on the other hand, while illiberal, operate within democratic frameworks. Their illiberalism manifests itself primarily in a nativist agenda, which is defined as the belief that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the 'native group,' and that 'non-native' elements threaten the homogeneity of the nation-state. Despite variations in focus, whether this be opposition to the Green agenda, resistance to "woke" policies, or something else, one key feature which unites the parties examined in this study is a shared hostility towards

immigration. This hostility is driven by an exclusionary logic whereby “other” groups are perceived as a threat to the cultural and ethnic homogeneity of the nation-state.² It is important to bear in mind that their level of radicalism can vary: for example, Italy’s Fratelli d’Italia (FdI), the only party in this study currently in charge of a governmental coalition, has espoused a more pragmatic approach to migration compared to the agenda of parties such as the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party, which has gone so far as to suggest deporting migrants.³

A further distinction can be drawn depending on the degree of Euroscepticism of the radical right parties in our study, with both “soft Eurosceptic” and “hard Eurosceptic” parties represented. At a European Parliament level, the former are affiliated with the ECR group, while the latter are mainly part of the PfiE group, which was founded in July 2024, in part as the successor of the “Identity & Democracy” group (ID). Hard euro-sceptic parties are also found in the “Europe of Sovereign Nations” (ESN) group, another recent formation, this time led by the AfD.

EU enlargement process at a crossroads

More than two decades after the European Council and EU-Western Balkans Summit held in Thessaloniki in 2003, where the EU formally committed to the integration of the Western Balkans and offered them a clear pathway to membership, the EU enlargement process finds itself at a crossroads.

Prior to 2022, there was a prevailing sense of enlargement fatigue due to prolonged negotiations, bilateral disputes, and a perceived lack of progress. However, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has given the process a renewed political momentum, prompting stronger political support from EU member states and ultimately leading to the opening of accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova and to Georgia receiving candidate status.⁴ Subsequently, in March 2024, the European Council gave its green light for the opening of talks with Bosnia & Herzegovina, following the Commission’s positive recommendation and despite not all member states being convinced the country fulfilled all 14 of the key priorities outlined by Brussels in 2019.⁵

A study conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) noted that since February 2022, public support for EU enlargement has risen in almost every member state.⁶ This is also mirrored in the statements of senior political leaders, including French President Emmanuel Macron who recently abandoned his earlier reluctant stance, stating that the EU should admit new countries “*as swiftly as possible*”. And while Russia’s invasion of Ukraine reinvigorated the enlargement process in general, it also shifted the focus eastwards and seemingly away from the Western Balkans.⁷

In September 2023, a group of 12 experts from France and Germany published a report commissioned by the German and French governments detailing the

reforms that were necessary for the EU to accommodate more member states.⁸ These proposals include:

- Shifting from unanimity to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in areas including foreign policy and tax policy, so as to streamline decision-making.
- Adjusting voting weights within QMV in the Council to reflect the demographic and economic realities of an enlarged EU.
- Allowing for more flexible cooperation among member states with different levels of integration readiness, including the introduction of an associate membership status.
- Increasing the EU budget to address the challenges of a larger Union, potentially reforming the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) to ensure adequate financial resources for candidate states.
- Substantially reforming the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), especially to accommodate Ukraine.

The above proposals suggest that there is a link between the EU's widening (enlargement) and its deepening. In particular, moves for a potential shift towards QMV in the Council in politically sensitive areas such as foreign policy and enlargement policy has been gaining momentum in certain European capitals, especially in Western Europe. Indicative is the launch of the so-called "inclusive Group of Friends to foster QMV in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)", a German-led initiative joined by France, Belgium, Finland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain, Romania with the dedicated objective "to improve [the] effectiveness and speed of our foreign-policy decision-making against the backdrop of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the growing international challenges the EU is facing".⁹ This push for QMV has largely been driven by repeated (temporary) Hungarian vetoes on EU military and financial aid to Ukraine and on proposed sanction packages against Russia, which Budapest has often lifted in exchange for concessions.

Why is the study important?

The intersection between the rise of these radical right Eurosceptic forces and the EU enlargement process is of particular relevance following the European elections, and still more importantly in light of upcoming national elections that could see the "balance of power" in the EU institutions shift further to the right. While much attention has been paid to these parties' potential impact on issues like migration and foreign policy, or even their potential reversal of Green Deal policies, **their stance on EU enlargement remains underexplored.** Understanding their positions on enlargement is crucial, as they could potentially challenge the prevailing status quo and have far-reaching implications for the future trajectory of European integration.

Ultimately, the EU's readiness for enlargement increasingly hinges not on objective criteria and alignment with the EU acquis, but on member states' ability to reach a political consensus regarding the timing and conditions of

enlargement. In other words, political will ultimately outweighs technical or legal aspects. In addition, public support for enlargement in EU member states is another key factor: certain national governments could potentially hold referenda to allow their citizens to decide on whether to accept new members, particularly if enlargement was combined with internal reforms and the further transferral of powers to Brussels.

Thus, evaluating the EU's political readiness for enlargement and navigating the ensuing challenges requires an in-depth multileveled understanding which takes stock of the emerging political dynamics not only in candidate states themselves (first level), but also in key member states (second level), in conjunction with the impact of global events and the geopolitical environment (third level).

Therefore, by primarily focusing on the second level, this study aims to:

- Understand the interest in, and potential impact of, right-wing Eurosceptic political parties on enlargement policy;
- Explore the avenues and trade-offs they will accept in exchange for their providing support for enlargement;

To that end, the study seeks to delve into the following key areas:

The positions radical right Eurosceptic forces take on enlargement:

- By investigating the views these parties/groups have articulated on EU enlargement in selected member states;
- By analysing whether their stance aligns with traditional longstanding national positions on enlargement, particularly in countries like Germany and Austria, which are known for their historical support for enlargement, or France and Netherlands, which are known for their scepticism vis-à-vis enlargement;
- By assessing whether these parties' positions on EU enlargement have also witnessed a shift since February 2022.

The implications for the enlargement process of the rise of radical right Eurosceptic forces:

- By assessing the extent to which these parties challenge or reinforce the existing enlargement agenda, both at the national and EU level;
- By examining whether these parties converge or diverge in terms of their stance on enlargement;
- By exploring potential differentiations among their positions and/or preferences vis-a-vis the Western Balkans compared to Ukraine and Moldova;
- By examining what type of enlargement, they support or envision (e.g. gradual/staged accession etc.);
- By examining their key concerns and the reasoning underlying their positions on EU enlargement;
- By exploring their position on the potential introduction of QMV in the EU's CFSP and whether it relates to their stance on enlargement

Which countries and political parties?

The study investigates selected member states and parties (in parenthesis their European Parliament party affiliation):

- Germany – Alternative für Deutschland/Alternative for Germany, AfD (ESN)
- France – Rassemblement National/National Rally, RN (Pfe)
- Italy – Fratelli d'Italia/Brothers of Italy, Fdi (ECR)
- Spain – VOX/Voice (Pfe)
- Netherlands – Partij voor de Vrijheid/Party for Freedom, PVV (Pfe)
- Sweden – Sverigedemokraterna/Sweden Democrats, SD (ECR)
- Austria – Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs/Freedom Party of Austria, FPÖ (Pfe)

These countries represent a diverse array of the political landscapes in which radical right Eurosceptic forces are gaining prominence and could potentially influence governing coalitions. In certain member states, they are already part of ruling coalitions or even in charge of them (Italy, and possibly Austria soon). In Germany and France, which will play a pivotal role in shaping the enlargement process as two of the most influential EU member states, shifts further to the right are also clearly observable in the political landscape.

It is important at this point to distinguish between those national radical right-wing parties affiliated with the ECR group in the European Parliament and those that are affiliated with the Pfe and ESN. The former is considered a “soft Eurosceptic” anti-federalist group which mainly advocates against overregulation, supports the bloc’s current intergovernmentalist model, and has both centre-right and far-right factions. The latter two are hard Eurosceptic groups, though there are certain policy overlaps and alignments between national parties belonging to the ECR and the Pfe in certain areas. Certain members of the ECR adopt a more hardline stance vis-a-vis Brussels, for instance, while certain parties in the Pfe, including Le Pen’s RN, are appearing increasingly pragmatic by toning down their anti-EU rhetoric.

Overall, the soft Eurosceptic parties tend to resist further integration but are not against the EU, while the hard Eurosceptic parties usually reject the entire project, calling for an exit from the Union or a shift to a loose alliance of European states.¹⁰

Methodology and sources

The research methodology employed a multifaceted approach, including:

- a. The analysis of party manifestos, official statements, and policy documents available on party websites;
- b. The examination of key statements made by leading party figures and senior officials;

- c. Conducting interviews with experts from think tanks and academic institutions in the member states under study to gain nuanced insights into the underlying dynamics shaping the positions of these parties on EU enlargement;
- d. Brainstorming sessions with renowned experts;
- e. Mapping and analysing voting patterns in the European Parliament's votes on the Commission's annual enlargement reports (2019-2024)

The decision to focus on select countries enhances both the feasibility and depth of the study. By narrowing the scope, the research delves into more detailed analyses of the political landscapes, party dynamics, and specific policy positions within each country chosen, allowing for the formulation of more targeted and specific recommendations.

Examining the influence in select member states

Germany's Alternative for Germany: rising electoral force with a hardline stance on enlargement

Country background

Germany has long been a steadfast advocate of EU enlargement albeit with significant emphasis on conditionality.¹¹ After the end of the Cold War, it actively pushed for the accession of several Eastern European countries. This has also been the case with the Western Balkans over the past two decades. Indicatively, the Berlin Process is a key German-led initiative aimed at fostering regional cooperation and development in the Western Balkans, which was initiated by then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014, when the enlargement process had started to lose steam.

Germany has also stressed the importance of the EU maintaining its credibility by keeping its enlargement promises, especially in the light of previous delays and setbacks in the Western Balkans. Consequently, it has pressed for the commencement of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, and ensured that countries like Serbia align with EU foreign policy standards, particularly with regard to sanctions against Russia.¹² Germany has also been proactive in addressing specific regional issues, such as facilitating the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and supporting Bosnia and Herzegovina through participation in the EUFOR Althea mission.

The "traffic lights" coalition government (2021-2024) in Germany led by SPD leader Olaf Scholz was among the most vocal supporters of granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, Germany's approach has shifted over the years from merely advocating for enlargement to linking it to broader EU reforms. In particular, the current German government insists that enlargement must be accompanied by internal EU reforms to streamline decision-making, including the extension of QMV to areas like foreign policy and taxation.

Interestingly, the longstanding position of consecutive German governments in support of EU enlargement has not necessarily been aligned with public sentiment in the country. Even though there is some recognition of the strategic benefits of integrating the Western Balkan countries, public opinion remains divided on the matter, and support is stronger for the candidacy of Ukraine and Moldova than it is for the Western Balkans. According to a Eurobarometer survey conducted between May and June 2023, overall only 42% of Germans backed the integration of new member states, putting Germany third from the bottom when it comes to public support for enlargement, behind Austria (29%) and France (35%).¹³ An EU-wide ECFR survey published in November 2023 revealed that the potential consequences for the EU budget were among the main concerns cited in relation to EU enlargement, especially given Germany's status as the main net contributor.¹⁴

Overall, Germany's EU enlargement policy has evolved from all-embracing support to a more nuanced approach that links enlargement to critical and much-debated institutional reforms within the EU.

Alternative für Deutschland/Alternative for Germany (AfD)

Founded in 2013, the AfD initially focused on economic liberalism and opposition to EU bailouts for indebted Eurozone countries. However, the party has since evolved into a radical right-wing force focused on Islam and migration and, in recent years, consistently advocating for Germany's exit from the Eurozone and, at times—during the German 2021 general elections, for instance—the EU. Although the 2023 party congress did not explicitly call for either a German exit or the dissolution of the EU, the AfD remains among the most Eurosceptic/anti-EU parties in our study. Its latest EU election manifesto, adopted in August 2023, deemed the EU a “failed project” and called for its re-establishment as a “Confederation of European Nations”.¹⁵

In January 2024, the AfD's co-leader Alice Weidel pledged to hold a “Brexit-style” referendum on EU membership, should they win the next general federal elections, which are now scheduled to take place on 23 February 2025.¹⁶ A significant aspect of the AfD's foreign policy is its stance towards Russia, which contrasts sharply with Germany's traditional alignment with NATO and the EU. The AfD has advocated for closer ties with Russia, viewing it as a strategic counterbalance to the EU and the US. This position includes opposition to sanctions against Russia and support for policies that align more closely with Russian geopolitical interests.

The AfD's pro-Russia inclinations are also reflected in its stance on Ukraine. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the AfD has continued to call for sanctions to be lifted and voiced criticism of Germany's support for Ukraine. Party leaders have travelled to Russia and Russian-occupied territories, signalling a willingness to engage with Russia despite the ongoing conflict.¹⁷ In November 2023, the AfD also expressed strong reservations ahead of the EU's decision to start accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova. Party leaders have cited significant deficiencies in these countries' legal systems and governance, as

well as ongoing conflicts, as major obstacles.¹⁸ They argue that admitting Ukraine, especially during its conflict with Russia, could draw the EU into further geopolitical tensions and military obligations.

Overall, the AfD position on EU enlargement is marked by firm opposition, and this stance has remained unchanged over the years, including with the recent opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova. In 2018, AfD MP Siegbert Droese demanded a referendum on the accession of Western Balkan countries, citing fears of "Balkanisation" due to corruption and organised crime in the region.¹⁹ More importantly, in its latest EU election programme/manifesto, the AfD warns against *"the surrender of sovereign rights and liability commitments without a referendum"*, reiterating its position in support of a nationwide vote on key areas pertaining to EU integration, such as the monetary union and Germany's own EU membership.²⁰

Bernhard Zimniok, a former AfD MEP, the party's foreign policy spokesman and a member of its Foreign Affairs committee between 2019-2024, has been particularly vocal in his opposition to EU enlargement. In October 2019, he opposed the opening of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, arguing that introducing two net recipient states would burden the fragile EU and calling it *"a fatal mistake"*.²¹ In 2021, he reiterated this stance, criticising the Rule of Law in the Western Balkan countries and pointing out that *"despite all the EU money that is used to guarantee the Rule of Law, there is little or no Rule of Law at all in these countries"*. He also highlighted security concerns related to illegal immigration and weapons trafficking from the region.²² In May 2023, Zimniok again criticised the EU for offering accession prospects to Serbia and Kosovo, highlighting the prevalence of organised crime in Kosovo, arguing that admitting these countries would not only import their conflicts into the EU but would also be financially burdensome for Germany, as these countries would be net recipients.²³

In December 2022, the AfD submitted a detailed proposal to the Bundestag, warning that EU enlargement could bring terrorism and organised crime to Germany. This document portrayed enlargement as a threat, specifically citing ISIS fighters from North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Additionally, they highlighted concerns about drug cartels, pointing to Albanian criminals in particular. The AfD also emphasised the high unemployment rates in Kosovo, especially among youth, which could potentially lead to poverty-driven migration to Germany. They argued that maintaining visa requirements for Western Balkan countries, to prevent such migration, is in Germany's national interest.²⁴

A large portion of the policies advocated by AfD politicians is driven by their need to increase their electability by seeking *"a narrative that will attract more votes for them"* and focusing on topics that resonate with potential voters.²⁵ EU enlargement is no exception, with the AfD explicitly or indirectly linking several of these topics with potential EU enlargement. Domestically, the AfD's hardline stance on EU enlargement resonates with its voter base, which is often sceptical

of the EU and concerned with migration and economic instability. The AfD's strategy involves adopting more mainstream language and references to attract a broader audience, while maintaining an anti-EU and anti-immigration core. The AfD exploits high levels of anti-immigrant sentiment stemming from demographic changes and economic concerns in order to attract voters from other parties, especially the centre-right conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), by appealing to those who feel neglected, and particularly young men in Eastern Germany where a sense of being second-class citizens and resentment towards foreigners are prevalent.²⁶

In a similar manner, their stance opposing sanctions on Russia and the provision of political and material support to Ukraine, can also be seen as an attempt to appeal to the significant pro-Russian segment within their voter base, including many ethnic Germans recently repatriated from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Germans who do not view Russia as a threat.²⁷ Indeed, Saxony, in Eastern Germany, appears to be at the epicentre of the AfD's strategy. A poll conducted only a few months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 indicated that 68% of people in the state had not changed their opinion of the Russian population since the invasion. Additionally, nearly 40% of respondents reported that their views on Vladimir Putin remained the same. Overall, the survey suggested that people in Eastern Germany are 13 percentage points less likely than those in the West to perceive Putin's Russia as a threat to their country.

Notably, the AfD has repeatedly argued that the multicultural model supported by the EU has failed in the Balkans, criticising "*the forced centralisation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the enforcement of Bosniak interests while ignoring the rights of Croats and Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina*". The AfD supports the formation of a separate Croatian entity similar to the Republika Srpska for the Serbs. As with their strategy of courting Russian-Germans, this stance is intended to appeal to Serbian and Croatian voters in Germany.²⁸

Despite past instances of antisemitism within its ranks, the AfD portrays itself as a strong ally of Israel.²⁹ While surprising at first glance, given the history of the German Far Right, this strategy is driven by its goal of attracting the votes of Jews who emigrated from the former Soviet Union, including those who could feel threatened by Muslim immigration.³⁰

What is particularly noteworthy is that the AfD has recently reverted to the use of a more "mainstream" political language intended to appeal to a broader audience, while maintaining its core anti-EU and anti-immigrant stance.³¹ For example, it refers to "privileged partnership" instead of full membership for the Western Balkan candidate states, a term originally used by Helmut Kohl with regard to . This strategy is also aimed at attracting CDU voters who are discontented with the party's current policies.

In summary, the AfD's opposition to EU enlargement is part of a broader strategy designed to attract votes through a combination of nationalism, anti-immigration rhetoric, and scepticism towards EU integration.

France's National Rally: open opposition to enlargement wrapped in pragmatic Euroscepticism

Country background

Since the discussions around EU enlargement began to include the Western Balkans in 2003, France's stance has switched between periods of caution and active engagement. Traditionally, France has been cautious about further EU enlargement, emphasising the need to deepen the EU's internal structure and governance before widening its membership. This cautious approach was rooted in concerns about the balance between the EU's internal market and welfare system, as well as the efficiency of EU decision-making processes with an increased number of member states.³²

France's scepticism has been evident in its policy decisions, which have included the introduction of a referendum requirement for all new accessions after Croatia in 2013, and its controversial blocking on starting accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in 2019, citing the need for internal EU reforms.³³ This decision highlighted a significant politicisation of the EU enlargement debate within France, marking a departure from previous indifference towards the region in French internal politics. French politicians, particularly from President Macron's party, have been cautious in their stance on enlargement, fearing that overt support might erode their domestic popularity.³⁴ According to a report published in February 2021 which analysed French public opinion on EU enlargement, nearly 58% of French citizens opposed the idea, echoing similar sentiments held by the Austrian and German public. However, unlike the French government, the governments of Germany and Austria have been consistent in their support of EU enlargement.³⁵

The geopolitical landscape shifted significantly following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This event served as a wake-up call for the EU, leading to a re-evaluation of the strategic importance of enlargement. Notably, France and its President Emmanuel Macron began to adopt a more favourable stance towards EU enlargement, recognising the geopolitical necessity of nations including Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkan countries being members of the EU. Macron's visit to Ukraine in June 2022 and his subsequent call for Kyiv's future EU accession marked a significant shift in France's position away from caution towards active support for the process. This change was further evidenced by Macron's statements at GLOBSEC in Bratislava in May 2023, in which he highlighted the importance of EU enlargement to meet the expectations of Moldova, Ukraine and the nations of the Western Balkans.³⁶ President Macron has therefore remained supportive of

the accession of Ukraine and Moldova in the context of Russian revisionism in eastern Europe. However, he has also stated that this could be a lengthy process, warning in December 2023 that Ukraine's accession was still a long "way off" in response to a question about its potential impact on the French agricultural sector.³⁷

Despite this shift, France continues to stress the need for internal EU reforms, particularly in areas such as the introduction of QMV for foreign policy and taxation issues, to avoid a more expanded but dysfunctional decision-making in the EU.³⁸ At the same time, France has not positioned itself on QMV on the intermediary steps of the enlargement process, a move that is thought would expedite applicant countries accession.³⁹ This position demonstrates a certain degree of continuity in France's approach, which has long sought to balance the need for enlargement with the necessity of internal structural reforms.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, France overall finds itself in the enlargement sceptics' camp. Most recently, it has often been difficult to distinguish between the mainstream right-wing, the French National Rally (RN), and Reconquête, its far-right rival on their positions regarding enlargement. Common themes of anti-enlargement discourse on the French political scene include linking enlargement with migration, employment issues for the French, and identity. Certain elements of the Macronian centre have also publicly voiced their scepticism towards EU enlargement.⁴¹

As analysed in the next section, these themes are particularly dominant in the enlargement discourse of the RN.

Rassemblement National/National Rally (RN)

The policy of the National Rally towards the EU has undergone significant changes over the years. Initially, the party originally known as the National Front, under the leadership of the late Jean-Marie Le Pen and then his daughter Marine Le Pen, was known for its strong xenophobic, nationalist, anti-immigration stance, advocating for significant cuts to legal immigration, stricter control of illegal immigration, and a more "independent" French foreign policy. It was also an advocate of an EU exit ("Frexit").

However, Marine Le Pen's leadership marked a strategic shift for the party, as she has recently sought to distance it from its far-right roots and its past under her father's leadership. In recent years, particularly since the National Front rebranded itself as the National Rally in 2018, the party has moderated its stance on the EU. No longer advocating for France's exit from the EU, the party now campaigns for EU reform and supports keeping the euro as the country's currency. In 2021, Le Pen expressed a desire for France to remain in the Schengen Area, but proposed restricting free movement to nationals of countries within the European Economic Area (EEA), excluding residents and visitors from another Schengen country.

This evolving stance has largely been interpreted as an attempt to appeal to a broader segment of the French electorate and increase the prospects of the

party achieving electoral successes at both national and European levels. Thus, while its European programme called in 2019 for the European Commission to be abolished, the most recent version (from February 2024) has watered down its criticism of the EU, indicating a more pragmatic stance.⁴² Rather than a potential “Frexit”, RN now advocates for a more intergovernmental approach shaped by a “European alliance of nations”, a vision shared by parties that have joined Victor Orbán’s Fidesz in the recently-formed “Patriots for Europe” group in the European Parliament.⁴³ RN envisions an “a la carte” Europe in which several competencies are brought back to the national level while EU policies that serve what they perceive to be French interests are retained.⁴⁴

The party has demonstrated greater consistency in its hardline scepticism vis-à-vis further enlargement in both the case of the Western Balkans and the most recent candidate states, Ukraine and Moldova. Despite presenting itself as a more moderate political force to gain broader support, and softening its rhetoric on the EU, its MEPs have consistently voted against all enlargement-related resolutions in the European Parliament in the previous mandate (2019-2024). In May 2020, Marine Le Pen publicly lambasted President Macron for his decision to lift France’s previous veto on the beginning of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, accusing him of “secretly pushing through a decision rejected by a majority of French people”.⁴⁵ Reacting to the announcement of the opening of accession talks with the two Western Balkan countries in 2022, Jordan Bardella, an MEP and the current President of the RN, described “perpetual enlargement as a horizon without any political or economic logic”, potentially “condemning the EU to impotence”.⁴⁶

More specifically, Bardella pointed to the huge financial disparities between the candidate states and the majority of EU member states, including France. However, in addition to economic concerns, Bardella explicitly cited cultural and religious grounds for his party’s opposition to the accession talks. With regard to Albania, he argued that both the EU and France “are already facing the challenge of preserving their identity”, expressing concerns about the implications of integrating a country with a Muslim majority, while also calling the country “a gateway to illegal immigration into Europe”. Another area to which he drew attention was the Rule of Law. He argued that Albania is a “real narco-state”, dominated by corruption and ruled by mafias, warning that these phenomena could spill over into Europe. Of particular interest was the fact that his alarmist rhetoric did not only focus on the alleged negative implications of EU enlargement for France, but extended to the entire bloc, and that he called for any further expansion to be refused “in accordance with the will and interests of the European peoples”.⁴⁷

Speaking earlier in 2024, Bardella also called EU enlargement one of the pillars of “Vonderleyism”, a neologism coined from the name of the current President of the Commission to refer to factors that could lead to the “suicide of Europe”: the migration pact, the Green Deal, and steps towards weakening the sovereignty of member states.⁴⁸

With regards to Ukraine and Moldova, RN has maintained a similar stance. In November 2023, reacting to the prospects of granting these two countries candidacy status, RN MEP Thierry Mariani cited the historical experience of the 2004 and 2007 accessions, which saw ten then two countries join the bloc, to express his party's opposition to further enlargement. Mariani called the precedent represented by these accessions "*not just a disappointment, but the accelerator of an exit from history*". Like his party's leader, the MEP emphasised the risks of increasing economic and social dumping, stating that "*the integration of the Balkan countries into the EU means ever more mafia in the French countryside*", whereas Ukraine's accession would mean "*importing war into the Union*".⁴⁹

Another interesting argument evoked by the parliamentarian in his plenary speech was the potential institutional implications of further enlargement, as he warned that that it could lead to a shift from unanimity to QMV in the decision-making process of the EU Council in key areas. However, Mariani cited national interest grounds to make his case, arguing that such a reform would make France "*dependent on the decisions of states which have delegated their independence to NATO*", which could potentially place the country in a minority at the Council table.⁵⁰ In February 2024, Bardella also warned that the unanimity rule was "*living on borrowed time*" due to the reforms needed to prepare for a future enlargement⁵¹ Notably, Emmanuel Macron has spoken in favour of QMV in the fields of foreign policy and taxation, deeming it a precondition for the eventual accession of new members to the bloc. This could mean the RN's arguments against a shift to QMV as a precondition for further enlargement could also be driven in part by domestic politics, and be aimed at portraying Macron as more willing to compromise national interest at the foreign-policy level for the sake of EU enlargement.

The most recent public intervention on EU enlargement by a high-profile member of the RN came in response to the European Commission's recent (12 March 2024) endorsement of the opening of accession negotiations with Bosnia & Herzegovina.⁵² The RN MEP Jean-Lin Lacapelle, who is also a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET), posted a video on TikTok criticising President von der Leyen's decision. After expressing his overall opposition to EU enlargement, he called the recommendation regarding Bosnia & Herzegovina a "*particularly bad choice*", arguing that the country presents the "*most problematic aspects*" of all the nations on the list of candidate states, citing its ethnic divisions and the risk of perpetual political instability. He sought to arouse particular alarm about the risk of "*Islamic jihadism*", once again citing security concerns in line with the arguments expressed in recent years by other RN colleagues.⁵³

For RN, drawing an explicit link between further EU enlargement and migration allows the party to capitalise on the polarising effects of that issue.⁵⁴ By framing the debate around potential inflows of migrants, RN can reinforce an "Us vs Them" narrative focused on migration and organised crime with regard, in particular, to Muslim-populated countries and the Roma populations which the

far right often associates with such activities. This narrative resonates especially with the party's electoral base in southern France.⁵⁵ This strategy leverages decades of alarmist RN rhetoric concerning the risks of increased migration, an area in which they have considerable political experience and enables RN to redirect the discussion towards a topic where they have historically been effective and influential.

Overall, concerns over further migration flows and potential increases in organised crime weigh more than economic arguments and budgetary concerns in RN's opposition to enlargement, especially in the case of the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, foreign policy also figures among the key drivers of the party's stance on EU enlargement, as well as of its political affiliation at EU level.⁵⁶ Unlike the ECR, members of the newly-formed PöE and ESN groups tend to be less critical of—if not outright sympathetic towards—the Kremlin, being more or less aligned with Orbán's stance against the imposition of further sanctions and in favour of peace being made between Russia and Ukraine, even at the expense of the latter's territorial integrity.⁵⁷

Italy's Brothers of Italy: pro-enlargement with a nationalist twist

Country background

Since the Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, where the EU committed to integrating the Western Balkans into its fold, Italy has been one of the most vocal supporters of EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans. This vocal support has also translated into concrete policy initiatives: Italy is a participant in the Berlin Process, a diplomatic initiative launched in 2014 to support the European integration of the Western Balkans.

The country has also strengthened bilateral relations with individual Western Balkan countries, providing political backing, economic assistance, and technical cooperation to support their European integration efforts. Italy's bilateral engagement includes initiatives such as economic development projects, cultural exchanges, and support for civil society organisations. In recent years, Rome has played a crucial role in fostering dialogue and cooperation between Brussels and the Balkan countries, utilising platforms such as the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative (AII), a political forum launched in Ancona in 2020. Overall, this support has transcended political affiliations, with cross-partisan backing evident at local, national, and European levels, despite several changes of government (and nine different Prime Ministers) witnessed between 2003 and 2022.

These two decades of support for the EU accession of the Western Balkans has been attributed by existing studies to a series of factors: Traditionally, Italy's foreign policy has viewed the Balkan region as strategically significant,

perceiving potential economic and security gains from EU enlargement in the region which largely outweigh any perceived costs. Italy views enlargement towards the Western Balkans as an opportunity to establish new alliances within EU decision-making processes.⁵⁸

Italy's support for EU enlargement is primarily driven by the desire to promote trade and economic exchanges, enhance capacities in justice and home affairs, combat corruption and transnational organised crime, strengthen the Rule of Law (RoL), and foster security and stability in the region. Italy believes that EU enlargement complements sub-regional cooperation platforms and considers the potential budgetary costs to be outweighed by the expected security and economic benefits that will ensue from the region's eventual integration into the EU. Indicatively, trade between Italy and its neighbouring Balkan countries, including EU member states Croatia and Slovenia, as well as candidate states such as Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania, along with potential candidate states Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, is worth €14 billion.⁵⁹

Overall, Italy evaluates the EU enlargement strategy positively, though not without reservations. Rome still sees a combination of incentives and pressures ('sticks and carrots') as the most effective means to encourage reforms and alignment with EU standards among candidate countries.

Fratelli d'Italia/Brothers of Italy (Fdi)

In October 2022, the radical right-wing nationalist movement "Fratelli d'Italia" (Fdi) secured a landslide electoral victory under the leadership of Georgia Meloni and successfully formed a right-wing governmental coalition with the far-right Lega Nord and the centre-right Forza Italia.

The views on EU enlargement espoused by the coalitions that governed Italy between 2003 and 2022 demonstrated a certain degree of consistency. It is therefore important to explore to what extent the views and policies of the current government coalition, which comprises two radical right anti-establishment parties, align with this largely favourable stance. The case of Italy and the Fdi presents additional interest, since to date it is the only party in this case study that has led a ruling coalition.

Meloni's victory initially raised concerns in the transatlantic camp, which feared potential pro-Russia sympathies similar to those espoused by other populist parties across Europe in the light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Notwithstanding a series of controversial conservative measures implemented domestically, Meloni has so far pursued a pro-Western foreign policy whose blend of a pragmatic approach towards the EU and strong Atlanticism mirrors the longstanding approach of other Italian right-wing governments in past decades.⁶⁰

This has also been the case with EU enlargement and the Western Balkans: In January 2023, only two months after taking charge, Prime Minister Meloni urged the EU to develop "a new vision" for the Western Balkans and stated that enlargement should be among its top priorities. Meloni conveyed this message in a video address delivered during a conference held in Trieste addressing "Italy and the Western Balkans: Growth and Integration", underscoring the government's commitment to bolstering the presence of Italian companies in the Balkans.⁶¹

In December 2023, more than a year after assuming her role, Meloni reiterated support for enlargement once again, calling expansion "*a strategic choice for all of us*". However, she also called for more reforms at an EU level, given that "*30-32 member states would bring new challenges*", adding that a discussion on the budget will be required beforehand, to sort out "*how EU policies are financed*".⁶² This statement occurred ahead of the EU Summit in Brussels at which the approval of accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova, both members at the time of the European Eastern Partnership, in a largely political decision in the wake of Russia's invasion in Ukraine, signalled a significant turning point/milestone for EU enlargement.

In the aftermath of the Summit, the Italian PM expressed "*great satisfaction with the concrete progress made at the European Council meeting in the enlargement process for Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Bosnia and Herzegovina*", calling it an "*achievement of significant value for the EU and Italy*". She also stated that "*our nation has played a leading role in actively supporting the Eastern Trio countries as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Western Balkan countries*". Likewise, the Italian EU affairs minister at the time, Raffaele Fitto, who is also a member of the Fratelli d'Italia party, called on member states to reflect on their priorities and on "*a new model*", including a reform of the EU's financial capacity, before admitting new member states.⁶³ This is also in line with the European segment of the Fdi electoral manifesto, published in 2022, which calls for a "*relaunch of the European integration system, for a Europe of Homelands, founded on the interests of the peoples and capable of addressing the challenges of our time*."⁶⁴ This emphasis on the need for EU reforms with a particular focus on the EU budget could be an attempt to avoid alienating its domestic audience, which could serve to politicise EU enlargement as has happened in other member states like Germany and Austria.

On Ukraine and Moldova, the latest states to enter EU accession talks, Meloni's Italy has also aligned with the European Commission and the broader pro-enlargement camp. Earlier in 2024, the Italian government again demonstrated its favourable stance on enlargement: following the European Council approving the opening of accession talks with Bosnia & Herzegovina, Meloni stated her preference for calling enlargement a project of "reunification", citing the continent's common history and geography. Furthermore, she emphasised Italy's "*leading role in this initiative*".⁶⁵

The party's overall favourable stance towards EU enlargement has been reflected at a European Parliament level as well. The Fratelli d'Italia is one of the ECR-affiliated parties that has voted in favour of the Commission's previous annual enlargement reports and enlargement strategies. In fact, as the current powerhouse of the Eurosceptic group, Meloni has recently helped shape a more coherent ECR stance on the issue, evidenced in its manifesto for the EU elections of June 2024.⁶⁶

In other words, the governing coalition under Meloni has largely opted for continuity rather than change with regard to previous ruling coalitions. The Meloni-led coalition has actually demonstrated greater zeal for supporting the enlargement process that previous right-wing Italian governments led by Silvio Berlusconi.⁶⁷ Besides seeking to maximise benefits relating to Italy's trade and investment ties, Meloni's pro-enlargement stance—and her support for Ukraine's EU aspirations, in particular—can also be seen as a strategic move to legitimise her party on the international stage. In spite of its controversial conservative policies domestically, Fdi has managed to establish itself as a reliable partner in the eyes of its partners, having boosted its pro-Western credentials through *inter alia* its continuous material support for Ukraine and its lukewarm stance towards China, with Italy quitting the Belt and Road Initiative.

Another aspect that needs to be considered as a driver of the party's enlargement position is the domestic political landscape. There, it is also fuelled by intra-coalition dynamics, given the competition brewing between Meloni and her coalition partner and foreign minister Antonio Tajani, the leader of Forza Italia—for decades the powerhouse of the mainstream Italian right, but increasingly sidelined since 2022 by Meloni's Fdi—ahead of future electoral campaigns. Meloni has already taken votes from its other junior partner, the Lega, a party that historically has had no clear stance on EU enlargement and has shown an inclination to be pro-Russia.

Interestingly, Meloni and her party justify their support for EU enlargement in strategic terms, adding a strong national element to their enlargement policy grounded in perceived economic, geopolitical, and security interests and reflecting the country's self-perception as an "Adriatic power". This position has allowed the Italian government to tie its conditional support for EU enlargement in the Western Balkans to migration control measures and other strategic interests such as economic ties. In February 2024, Rome signed an agreement with Tirana, externalising the processing of asylum requests in migration hubs in Albania. This aligns with the Fdi-led government's tough stance on migration and preference for the externalisation of border controls.

Finally, Meloni's support for EU enlargement could have implications for broader EU integration. A parallel could be drawn between Meloni's supportive stance on EU enlargement and the traditional UK position during its time in the EU.⁶⁸ The UK was initially a strong advocate for EU enlargement, particularly in the 1990s, as a means of preventing deeper political integration and federalism within the EU. By promoting the accession of new member states, the UK aimed to dilute

the push for a more centralised EU. To some extent, it could be argued that Meloni's pro-enlargement stance, coupled with her party's broader Euroscepticism, could grow into a policy that resembles the UK's past strategy. By advocating the inclusion of new member states, Meloni could counterbalance the push for deeper vertical integration within the EU, advocating for "*a Europe of nation-states*" that includes like-minded candidates, with the European Council continuing to call the shots in an intergovernmental rather than a supranational federalist setting.

Spain's VOX: nativist with unclear position on enlargement

Country background

Spain has been a supporter of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, albeit with notable reservations when it comes to the need for strict criteria regarding Rule of Law, governance and economic reform to be met.

A noteworthy element of Spain's position is its refusal to recognise Kosovo's independence, which was declared in 2008. This is mainly due to Spain's own concerns about secessionist movements, particularly in Catalonia and the Basque Country. However, Spain has actively backed the candidacies of Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia, with Madrid remaining consistently in line with the broader EU strategy. In June 2022, Spain supported the EU's decision to grant Ukraine and Moldova official candidate status with the country's foreign minister, José Manuel Albares framing his government's firm backing as part of a larger European effort to safeguard Ukraine's sovereignty and support its long-term recovery and reform.⁶⁹

In spite of its longstanding support for EU enlargement, Spain also tends to align with those EU countries that argue for a more gradual, conditional approach to enlargement, rather than a fast-tracked process, particularly for countries which are still undergoing substantial reforms. Spain joined the "Group of Friends of Qualified Majority Voting in the Common Foreign and Security Policy" in May 2023 to push for QMV in EU foreign policy, in line with France and Germany's calls to adapt EU decision-making to accommodate enlargement, while also advocating for strict conditionality.

In fact, Spain's approach has been quite pragmatic: remaining strongly focusing on conditionality, it has never blocked the enlargement process.⁷⁰ This illustrates an effort to balance solidarity with candidate countries against protecting its own domestic priorities. For instance, in recent discussions within the Atlantic group—an informal intra-EU coalition consisting of countries with strong ties to the Atlantic, including Spain, France, Portugal, Ireland, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Denmark—Spain expressed concerns that the financial costs of enlargement could impact national interests, such as agricultural aid.

Spanish citizens are largely pro-European, with the 2023 Eurobarometer revealing that 71% were in favour of EU enlargement, which is well-above the EU average.⁷¹ As a result, enlargement has never been subject to domestic political debate, as it has been in countries like Austria.

VOX/Voice

Founded in 2013, the populist radical right-wing party VOX ("voice") had emerged as a major force in Spanish politics by 2019.

Initially formed by breakaway members from the centre-right PP, VOX capitalised on nationalist sentiments and opposition to separatism in Catalonia and the Basque Country. It aligns with other European far-right movements, advocating for strict immigration controls, anti-Muslim policies, traditional values, and scepticism towards certain EU policies. Despite losing seats in the 2023 elections, it remains Spain's third-largest party.

In the 2023 Spanish general election, VOX lost 19 seats, dropping from 52 seats in the Congress of Deputies to 33. VOX peaked after the November 2019 election, in which it garnered 3.6 million votes and became the third-largest party in the Spanish Parliament. In the European elections in June 2024, it won six seats in the European Parliament, which once again put it in third place among Spanish parties.

VOX has actively promoted nativism.⁷² The party's ideology is rooted in the belief that the Spanish identity must be preserved, emphasising a defence of traditional Spanish values and a strong stance against both internal threats, like secessionist movements, and external threats, particularly immigration. Its preoccupation with issues pertaining to the domestic political agenda contrasts sharply with its vague foreign policy agenda. As noted by Elena Venture of Carnegie Europe: *"VOX's approach to foreign policy derives from this domestic emphasis and is therefore anchored in a firm anti-immigration stance, strong defence of Spain's national interests, and opposition to EU policies, which the party perceives as violating the country's sovereignty."*⁷³

Likewise, its EU policy is largely shaped by its own domestic agenda. While not opposing Spain's EU membership, it has reiterated the right of EU member states to leave the bloc under Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). This point was enshrined in the party's 2019 European elections manifesto, which warns that *"any reform to the contrary would be an attack on the spirit of integration."*⁷⁴ With regards to enlargement, VOX has not been outspoken and has no coherent or clearly defined stance on the issue, which does not form part of its agenda. However, its MEP and vice-chair Hermann Tertsch voted against the 2023 enlargement package recommending the opening of negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova.⁷⁵

In the 2019-2024 mandate of the European Parliament, VOX was a member of the "soft" Eurosceptic ECR, along with Meloni's Fdl, the Polish Justice & Law

Party, the Sweden Democrats and others. However, in July 2024, following the latest EU elections, VOX's leadership announced its decision to quit the Meloni-led group and join the newly-formed successor of the ID, the Orbán-led Patriots for Europe. This shift was made amid an ongoing process of reconfigurations taking place to the right of the political mainstream.⁷⁶

For now, the strategic decision VOX made earlier this year to leave regional coalitions and distance itself from the political establishment is part of a broader push to distinguish itself in Spanish politics. VOX's lack of a defined position on EU enlargement may change due to its new alliances.⁷⁷ Historically, VOX's rise was driven by opposition to Catalan separatism, not immigration as with other European far-right parties. However, in recent years, VOX has followed the example of other far-right parties and increasingly focused on migration. Having now joined forces with parties including Orbán's Fidesz and France's RN, VOX could well adopt a more formal stance on EU enlargement, especially with regard to Ukraine and the Western Balkans. Orbán supports the accession of the Western Balkans, but is against Ukraine's membership due to its political and economic implications. It remains to be seen whether VOX will adopt a similar differentiated stance in the months ahead.

Netherlands' Party for Freedom: anti-enlargement rhetoric meets coalition politics

Country background

Over the past two decades, the Netherlands has displayed an increasingly cautious and stringent approach towards EU enlargement.⁷⁸

In the early 2000s, the Netherlands was broadly supportive of EU enlargement, viewing it as a means to stabilise the Western Balkans. However, the expansion of the EU in 2004 and subsequent enlargements in 2007 and 2013 altered the internal balance of power within the Union, leading to concerns in the Netherlands about its diminished influence. This, coupled with the Eurozone crisis, heightened fears about the economic implications of further enlargement.⁷⁹ The crisis highlighted the potential financial burdens on the Netherlands as a significant net contributor to the EU budget, especially if new members were economically weaker.

The Dutch approach has been marked by a "strict but fair" policy. Over the past decade, the country adopted a more constructive approach to EU enlargement under the previous government led by Mark Rutte, backing various policy mechanisms to help the Western Balkan countries meet the accession criteria.⁸⁰ However, they also demanded progress on key reforms, particularly in governance and the Rule of Law, before they would support further enlargement. For example, in 2019, the Dutch Parliament rejected the European Commission's recommendation to open accession negotiations with Albania, citing inadequate

progress in combating corruption and organised crime.⁸¹ Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Dutch Parliament demanded the inclusion of geopolitical alignment alongside traditional RoL criteria, emphasising that candidate countries must align their foreign policy with the EU's, including implementing sanctions against Moscow.⁸²

Since February 2022, public support for EU enlargement has risen significantly across Europe, including in traditionally sceptical countries like the Netherlands. The most recent ECFR survey indicated that even in the Netherlands, there has been a noticeable shift in public opinion in favour of enlargement, driven by the geopolitical context and security considerations following Russia's act of aggression against Ukraine. Nevertheless, the Dutch population remains among the most enlargement-sceptic in the bloc. A barometer survey published by Clingendael in March 2024 revealed that the accession of Ukraine alone has the support of a majority of the Dutch people. On the contrary, the Dutch public remains hesitant regarding the potential accession of the Western Balkans: only 40% of respondents were in favour of Serbia's, Albania's and Kosovo's accession while approximately 50% supported the accession of North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Migration and the free movement of people cited among the public's key concerns.⁸³

Partij voor de Vrijheid/Party for Freedom (PVV)

The PVV is led by Geert Wilders, a far-right ideologue known for opposing Islam. Over the years, he has advocated for the Netherlands' withdrawal from the EU and, most recently, called for an end of EU support for Ukraine. With regards to the EU enlargement, in the run up to the Dutch general elections in 2010, the PVV called for a halt to any further EU enlargement, opposing Croatia's accession. Its leader in the European Parliament, Barry Madlener, went so far as to advocate for expelling Romania and Bulgaria from the EU just three years after their accession.⁸⁴

According to its 2023 election manifesto, the PVV wanted "*a sovereign Netherlands, a Netherlands that is in charge of its own currency, its own borders and makes its own rules*". Rejecting a "political union" like the EU, it advocated for a Dutch exit from the EU, a "Nexit".⁸⁵

However, following the electoral results of November 2023, and after entering into coalition talks, Wilders has signalled a U-turn in the PVV's stance on EU membership. Departing from its longstanding position, its manifesto/programme for the EU elections, published in April 2024, called instead for a binding referendum on the matter. The party's focus now seems to be on reforming the EU from within. The party now deems "*intensive economic cooperation*" to be beneficial and wants to limit the power of Brussels without advocating for a complete exit. To that end, it is pushing for the restoration of the Netherlands' power of veto over EU decision-making and for turning the country into a net recipient of EU funds rather than a net contributor. In particular, the manifesto states, "*We are putting our energy into reforming the EU from within*", rejecting

the idea of a "*European superstate*".⁸⁶ Geert Wilders, who dictates the party's direction, has realised that cooperating with leaders like Viktor Orbán and observing examples like Meloni in Italy can help it achieve its objectives more effectively than pleading for a *Nexit*.⁸⁷

Nevertheless, as with the RN in France, despite watering down its overall anti-EU rhetoric, the party has not softened its stance on EU enlargement. PVV has maintained a consistent stance against the accession of the Western Balkan states, and Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo and Albania in particular, given their significant Muslim populations. Overall, PVV foreign policy is heavily influenced by its view that Islam poses what Wilder terms "*an existential problem*".⁸⁸ This viewpoint shapes the party's stance on several issues, including EU enlargement. Its longstanding opposition to EU enlargement was reiterated once again in its latest electoral manifesto in April 2024, in which it explicitly states that the PVV stands against "*further expansion of the EU or steps in that direction*". Notably, since the manifesto was published a few months after the EU decided to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, it indicates an objection that extends beyond the Western Balkans.

In an interview with Euronews in December 2023, Wilders once again made it clear that he opposes the inclusion of any new countries in the EU, specifically mentioning Ukraine. He stated, "*No, I think that no other country should join Europe. I'm even in favour of Romania and Bulgaria to leave [sic] the EU*".⁸⁹ Wilders explained that the Dutch public believes the EU is already too large and that a smaller Europe with fewer responsibilities is preferable. He also argued that Romania and Bulgaria were "*very unready and very corrupt*" at the time of their accession, which contributed to his party's opposition to further enlargement. Given his strong anti-migration rhetoric, coupled with his having already advocated for a restriction of labour mobility within the EU through the introduction of work permits, any further expansion of the single market and the free movement of people would clearly go against the core of his party's agenda.

After six months of negotiations, with Wilders relinquishing his bid to become prime minister, his PVV party joined a government coalition in May 2024 with the centre-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), the right-wing populist Farmer-Citizen Movement (BBB) and the centrist New Social Contract (NSC). The dynamics of the coalition meant the PVV had to moderate some of its extreme positions, such as banning the Quran and mosques. Still, the PVV has remained firm in its anti-enlargement stance. The (preliminary) coalition agreement also included a line on EU enlargement: while the coalition agreement does not reject the EU enlargement process outright, it indicates that the Dutch government will be highly critical and not give any candidate the benefit of the doubt. More specifically, the recently-formed coalition agreed that the government reserves the right to "*restrict the free movement of persons within the EU if and insofar as expansion of the EU is discussed*", emphasising the importance of retaining national sovereignty and being critical of further enlargement.⁹⁰

Although the Netherlands has always been moderately wary of EU enlargement, the above indicates a notable consensus vis-à-vis the coalition's scepticism towards the acceptance of new member states. In principle, the VVD, NSC and BBB, PVV's three coalition partners, are not inherently against EU enlargement, as long as the candidate states fulfil the relevant criteria. Additionally, however, parties like the centre-right VVD were not willing to invest significant political capital and jeopardise progress in the coalition talks over EU enlargement, which was a red line for the PVV with Wilders reiterating his anti-enlargement views in his pre-election statements. Instead, more pressing issues like the cost of living, migration and the war in Ukraine have dominated the agenda, reducing the immediate focus on enlargement. In other words, accommodating the PVV's stance on EU enlargement was one of the easier issues for the negotiating parties to agree on, along with a tougher approach to migration.

The current coalition's critical stance on EU enlargement suggests it will be difficult for any candidate country to convince the Dutch government of their readiness for membership. Budgetary constraints could also lead to the Netherlands closing embassies, including potentially in the Western Balkans.⁹¹ All the above could suggest a potential departure from the country's more engaged position under former Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

In summary, while the Netherlands has taken a more constructive approach towards EU enlargement in the past, particularly under Mark Rutte's government, the inclusion of the PVV in the current coalition has amplified the Dutch government's scepticism with regard to EU enlargement. This provides a tangible example of the European Far Right capitalising on its political capital to influence the government's position on various fronts, including EU enlargement.

Sweden's Sweden Democrats: vague on enlargement, firm on sovereignty

Country background

Since 2003, Sweden has been a strong advocate for the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU, pushing for reforms and progress towards accession. Like Madrid, Stockholm also insists on the importance of candidate states fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria, which include stable institutions, a functioning market economy, and adherence to EU laws and regulations.

Enlargement was one of the key priorities of the first Swedish presidency of the EU Council in 2001 ahead of the 2004 "Big Bang" enlargement.⁹² Sweden would also promote EU enlargement during its Council presidency in 2009; however, the period was marked by economic and institutional challenges and the presidency focused on pragmatic brokerage rather than strong leadership. Thus, while it supported enlargement, it did not make significant breakthroughs in this area,⁹³ largely due to the broader enlargement fatigue the EU experienced after

the membership accessions of the 2004-2007 period. However, alongside Poland, Sweden played a leading role in the launch of the EU's Eastern Partnership.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 significantly shifted the EU's enlargement dynamics, while also reinvigorating Sweden's support for enlargement. Since then, Sweden has strongly supported the granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova, aligning with the broader EU strategy to integrate these countries more closely into European structures. Building on that, Sweden's presidency in the first half of 2023 focused on reinvigorating the enlargement process, advocating for institutional reforms to accommodate new members and ensuring a strategic approach to future enlargements. Overall, Sweden's political elites favour enlargement, reflecting public sentiment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with a Eurobarometer survey in 2023 showing that a strong majority (60%) of the Swedish population backed enlargement.⁹⁴ A 2023 ECFR study revealed that Ukraine figured particularly high as an enlargement priority.⁹⁵ Sweden is traditionally in favour of institutional reform, including a shift to QMV in the CFSP, and has joined the German-led "Friends of Qualified Majority Voting". Overall, the country has belonged to the pro-enlargement camp since it joined the EU in 1995, with a strong focus on conditionality.

Nevertheless, Sweden's approach to EU policy stands out because it is highly depoliticised and rarely forms part of electoral manifestos or political debate. At the national level, EU affairs are often perceived as economic issues, which receive broad public support without significant debate. Despite the country's historically vocal supportive stance, due to geographic and political distance EU enlargement is not a major issue in Sweden, as it is in countries like Austria; a potential accession route for Turkey is the only exception to this rule. In addition, support for enlargement remains strong from the government and the major centrist parties. Yet, at the same time there is also low support for pairing enlargement with deepened integration.

Sverigedemokraterna/Sweden Democrats (SD)

Since October 2022, after finishing second in the general elections of the previous month with 20.5% of the vote, the Sweden Democrats (SD), a nationalistic and populist radical right party, have been supporting a minority government formed by a pro-European centre-right coalition comprising the Moderates, Christian Democrats and Liberals. By providing its support on an ad hoc basis to the minority government, the SD have managed to influence certain policies and set the agenda of the ruling coalition in different areas, but primarily migration, law and order, and climate policy.

Similar to other radical right parties included in our study, the SD's broader position towards EU membership has undergone a shift in recent years from an explicitly anti-EU towards a Eurosceptic stance. Indicatively, there have been non calls for a "Swexit" since 2018⁵. However, key party figures have been calling for several decision-making powers to be returned to member states. For

example, they have called for an opt out in justice and home affairs that would allow the country to defy the recently adopted new EU migration and asylum rules.⁹⁶

In an article they co-wrote published in February 2024, Jimmie Åkesson, leader of the Sweden Democrats, and Charlie Weimers, Vice-President of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), proposed that references to the EU be removed from the Swedish Constitution, and in particular the phrase "*Sweden is part of the European Union*", which was incorporated into the Swedish Constitution in 2010.⁹⁷ This move largely reflects the party's focus on prioritising Sweden's sovereignty and interests in its EU dealings, indicating its nativist viewpoint.

On foreign policy, the SD have become increasingly pro-NATO and critical of Russia since the latter's invasion of Ukraine, mirroring the change of stance of several ECR members such as the Fratelli d'Italia and the Polish Law & Justice Party. Earlier in 2024, its MEP and Committee on Foreign Affairs member Charlie Weimers openly opposed the potential inclusion of Victor Orbán's Fidesz party in the ECR group, primarily to "*secure that ECR remains an Atlanticist and Putin-critical group*".⁹⁸

Despite their overall pro-Western foreign policy orientation, the SD have been against or lukewarm at best about further EU enlargement, with the exception of Turkey's EU prospects, to which they have adopted an openly hostile position. In their 2019 European election manifesto, the SD questioned whether the EU was "*capable of admitting more members*", citing economic challenges and the questionable capacity of new members to control their borders as their two key areas of concern.⁹⁹ In an interview with Swedish media in March 2024, MEP Weimers reiterated the party's economic argument against further enlargement, stating that the "*Union mainly benefits from more net paying countries*" rather than grant recipients. Instead, he called for alternatives to membership "*to secure good relations with the West*", should candidate states not be in a position to meet the conditionality criteria, warning against any "*relaxation of the demands that were made with Romania and Bulgaria for political reasons*".¹⁰⁰

Since becoming a support party for Ulf Kristersson's government, the SD's opposition to Sweden's EU policy in the national parliament has decreased significantly. Indicatively, there has been a drastic drop in the Sweden Democrats' dissenting opinions, from 39% during the first Looven government (2014-2018) to only 4% between October 2022 and December 2023. The Sweden Democrats dissented on twelve occasions, in relation inter alia to the conclusions on the enlargement and stabilisation and association process, and to Bosnia and Herzegovina's candidate status.¹⁰¹

In the European Parliament, the SD have either abstained or voted against the Commission's EU enlargement reports and strategies, as well as the Association Agreements with Moldova and Ukraine.¹⁰² This is in contrast with Italy's Fratelli d'Italia and closer to the stance adopted by the majority of what were ID members at the time, rather than the ECR group. According to AssistEU's classification, the SD is clearly closer to the former ID / current P/E than they are

to the ECR in areas such as EU enlargement, the free movement of persons, emergency aid and monetary issues. According to Weimers himself, this is because the SD have a more fiscally conservative policy on budgetary issues compared to the ECR group; he also notes that the ECR group was heavily influenced by the Polish delegation during the previous mandate (2019-2024), and that Poland is a significant net recipient of EU funds.¹⁰³

In sum, the SD have been willing to acknowledge "*the mixed results of the EU's eastern expansion*", arguing that the enlargement has supported state development but have also come at a cost due to low-wage competition, organised crime, corruption, and migration challenges. They claim that the EU is not currently capable of integrating more members without making these issues worse still. To support the development of neighbouring countries, they recommend enhancing trade rather than providing accession aid. The SD also oppose EU Pre-accession Assistance, arguing that reliance on accession aid undermines the long-term self-sufficiency of candidate countries and suggesting that aid should go to poorer, vulnerable populations in developing countries.

Overall, despite their Euroscepticism, the SD approach to EU enlargement is not as aggressive as that of other radical right parties in Europe. In fact, in spite of its expressed scepticism towards the accession of more member states, the SD do not actually have a concrete or well-defined policy on EU enlargement.¹⁰⁴ Their electoral campaigns are largely focused on domestic issues, on migration and crime prevention in the main, rather than EU-related issues. Despite a series of objections pertaining to the Rule of Law and budgetary implications, their overall influence on Sweden's stance towards EU enlargement is limited compared to other political priorities in relation to which they have successfully shaped the government's agenda.

As it did during the national elections of 2022, their latest EU election campaign largely revolved around migration and crime prevention, which SD members tend to link to immigration from the Middle East rather than the Western Balkans or Eastern European states. EU enlargement remains an issue of limited political interest domestically; in contrast with other member states in our study, in Sweden it does not provide fertile ground for politicisation for the sake of political gains. However, given the party's emphasis on sovereignty and the repatriation of decision-making powers to the national level, the SD have opposed a move towards QMV in the Council. Thus, despite its lack of a coherent EU enlargement position, the SD are openly against a series of reforms and deeper integration measures that would be needed to potentially accommodate new member states.

There are interesting parallels between the SD and Finland's Finns Party, another Nordic radical right party. Unlike the SD, which is currently providing conditional support to a minority government, the Finns Party has been part of a four-party coalition since 2021. Like several other parties in our study, they have toned down their anti-EU rhetoric without abandoning their core Eurosceptic views.

Similarly, they have embraced a pro-NATO stance following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, backing Finland's bid to join the military alliance. As in the case of the SD, this can be explained by particularities of the country: namely, its geographic proximity to, and difficult past with, Russia/the Soviet Union. Unlike the SD, however, the Finns have openly expressed an anti-enlargement position, even though they also tend to focus mostly on domestic issues such as migration and climate policy. Overall, the attention paid to enlargement by Nordic radical right parties remain limited, with Ukraine dominating their positions, since they see supporting Ukraine as politically advantageous.

Austria's Freedom Party: a purely anti-enlargement party ready to govern

Country background

Overall, Austria has been a staunch supporter of the EU enlargement process, particularly in relation to the Western Balkans, a policy which largely reflects the country's geographical proximity and historical ties to the region. Vienna has been a consistent supporter of the EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, which aims to foster long-term economic recovery and development in the region.¹⁰⁵ It has also been a pioneer in the "Friends of the Western Balkans", an informal group initiated by Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg in 2023 and consisting also of the foreign ministers of Greece, Italy, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic.¹⁰⁶

In May 2022, Schallenberg and Austria's Europe minister Karoline Edtstadler proposed the gradual integration of six Western Balkan countries into the EU framework. This proposal includes cooperation in areas like the single market, customs, energy, and transport infrastructure, along with enhanced collaboration with Frontex and Europol.¹⁰⁷ However, when it comes to supporting Ukraine and Moldova's accession bids, the current Austrian government, which is ruled by a coalition between the centre-right Austria's People Party (ÖVP) and the Greens, has indicated support. However, it has also put pressure to ensure that the Western Balkans are not left behind.

Ahead of the December 2023 Western Balkans Summit and European Council Meeting, Austrian Chancellor and ÖVP leader Karl Nehammer argued that *"there should be no preferential treatment for Ukraine, especially over Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is now also in accession negotiations"*. He opposed fast-tracking Ukraine's accession negotiations, insisting instead on offering Ukraine and Moldova a perspective for accession, but without expedited procedures. Alternatively, Vienna insisted that the EU should open accession talks with Bosnia-Herzegovina if it does so with Ukraine.¹⁰⁸

Ultimately, Bosnia-Herzegovina successfully secured the opening of accession talks a few months later, in March 2024. However, Austria's stance in December

2023, prompted critics to argue that Austria was using Bosnia-Herzegovina's accession bid to indirectly block the path available to Ukraine.¹⁰⁹ Besides Vienna's longstanding support for the accession of the Western Balkans, another factor contributing to its more sceptical position vis-à-vis Ukraine and Moldova has been the domestic political landscape in Austria and the FPÖ's increasing political sway after winning the most votes in the September 2024 general elections. As outlined in the next section, the FPÖ's growing influence has sparked a series of contentious debates on issues such as support for Ukraine and migration policies.

It is worth noting that, despite the consistent pro-enlargement position maintained by the country's governmental elites, with regard to the Western Balkans at least, several polls held over the years indicate that the Austrian population tends to be highly sceptical about enlargement.¹¹⁰ A 2023 survey by the Austrian Society for European Policy (ÖGfE) revealed that Bosnia & Herzegovina had the highest approval among Austrians, with a mere 29% in favour of the nation's accession, 41% opposed, 19% indifferent, and 11% undecided, whereas Kosovo had the lowest approval at 16%, with a 53% rejection rate. Only 24% supported Ukraine's EU accession, while 49% were opposed, 15% were indifferent, and 11% undecided. Opinions had remained stable since July 2022.

Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs/Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ)

The FPÖ was founded in 1956, originally comprising various nationalist groups. Unlike the majority of far-right parties across the EU, it has been part of various governmental coalitions as a junior partner over the years, first with the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) (1983-1986) and later with the ÖVP on two separate occasions (2000-2006 and 2017-2019). Under Jörg Haider's leadership after 1986, the FPÖ adopted a more Eurosceptic, largely nationalistic and xenophobic stance. Its latest involvement in a governmental coalition, along with its return to power in the last elections after months of leading the polls, has allowed the party to influence Austria's policy direction from within.

The FPÖ's stance towards the EU has thus evolved from initial support for European integration to increasing Euroscepticism, especially during Austria's EU accession negotiations in the early 1990s. Although it has never called for an exit from the EU, it opposes EU centralism and advocates for national sovereignty. It also rejects treaty reforms that would increase Brussels' power and opposes majority voting in the EU Council. However, under Herbert Kickl, the FPÖ has recently intensified its anti-EU rhetoric. Similar to other radical right parties across the bloc, foreign policy has never been a central focus for the FPÖ, while migration has always figured high on its agenda. The party prioritises the protection of Austria's identity, following a conservative and narrowly nationalist approach encapsulated by their slogan "Austria First".

Historically, the FPÖ harbours anti-American sentiments and demonstrates considerable sympathy for Russia. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in

2014, the FPÖ condemned EU sanctions against Moscow. However, although the FPÖ held the Foreign Ministry portfolio during the ÖVP-FPÖ coalition of 2017-2019, it did not result into any concrete shifts away from the country's traditional foreign policy orientation, which mirrors that of the EU. Nevertheless, in contrast with several like-minded parties across Europe, such as the Sweden Democrats, the Fdl, or even the RN, the FPÖ has not altered its stance towards the Kremlin since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It continues to oppose sanctions against Russia, arguing that they violate Austria's neutrality. Its leader Herbert Kickl has advocated for understanding both sides, partly blaming the US for the conflict. The party is also critical of EU military support for Ukraine.

On EU enlargement, the FPÖ has an overall position that ranges from sceptical to hostile, depending on the candidate state. As Stephan Lehne, senior fellow at Carnegie Europe, highlights in a research paper published in April 2024, the FPÖ has effectively exploited public scepticism towards EU enlargement to bolster its political standing, heavily criticising the government for its favourable stance towards the accession of the nations of the Western Balkans.¹¹¹ While the FPÖ's negative stance towards on enlargement is underpinned by its opposition to further migration flows and to the EU straining its budget further by allowing the accession of more net-recipient states, there is also a more opportunistic element to its stance, given that the polls indicate the Austrian population as a whole is highly sceptical vis-à-vis enlargement.

To date, the FPÖ has adopted a highly critical stance towards the EU's position on Ukraine's accession bid, with its leader Herbet Kickl, who has described Victor Orbán as his political "role model", being particularly outspoken on the matter.¹¹² In November 2023, a month before the EU's decision to open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, he lambasted the EU for wanting to admit "*a country at war with another country*" as "political insanity". He also accused Brussels elites of dragging the EU and Austria "*into an economic war that is incompatible with our eternal neutrality*". He pointed out that Ukraine's accession would have very serious consequences for the bloc's budgetary balance, arguing that "*Ukraine alone would need around 15% of the total EU budget*". He has also placed especial focus on agricultural subsidies, claiming that under the current financial framework for 2021-2027, "*Ukraine would be entitled to nearly a third of the budget for agricultural subsidies, and an additional 61 billion euros from the EU's cohesion funds.*" Finally, he argued that "*Ukraine does not fulfil the Copenhagen criteria for joining the EU in the slightest*" due to "*massive corruption problem*", and called on the ÖVP-Greens governing coalition to vote against Ukraine's accession.¹¹³

Similarly, in an interview in March 2024, Petra Steger, a member of the Austrian parliament and the FPÖ's spokesperson on European affairs, argued that "*a serious taboo has been broken in Europe, with the opening of EU accession negotiations with a country at war*". She also placed particular emphasis on the Copenhagen criteria, questioning whether Ukraine fulfils even a single criterion from either a political or economic point of view. However, particularly noteworthy was her statement that: "*the FPÖ is of the opinion that we should not*

forget about the real candidate countries".¹¹⁴⁷ Despite the party's sceptical stance towards EU enlargement overall, the above indicates a distinction between the way it views the potential accession of the Western Balkans, on the one hand, and of Ukraine, on the other.

Another interesting tendency is the distinction drawn by senior FPÖ figures between Western Balkan states themselves. For example, in May 2023, the party's co-leader Dominik Nepp remarked that the EU often appears "insincere" in relation to the accession prospects of the Western Balkan countries, creating the impression of double standards in the accession process. He noted that Serbia has faced the imposition of constant new conditions during its negotiations, arguing that other countries have received more favourable treatment. Regarding Kosovo, Nepp stressed that its EU membership should only occur once a mutually acceptable resolution to the Kosovo issue has been found and agreed on. This sentiment has also been echoed by Maximilian Krauss, head of the FPÖ parliamentary group in the Vienna Assembly, who condemned the "*blackmail methods*" the EU has applied to Serbia, especially in the pressure it has applied on the country to impose sanctions on Russia.

This differentiated approach is driven by political calculations. Like the AfD in Germany, the FPÖ has tailored its political narrative to gain votes by highlighting issues that resonate with the electorate, and particularly with Austria's sizeable Serbian community. This strategy includes adopting a pro-Serbian stance as opposed to the hard line it takes towards countries like Albania and—especially—Kosovo, in relation to which they have retained a broader Eurosceptic and anti-immigration rhetoric. In other words, the FPÖ's position is not only about EU enlargement as a whole, and is nuanced to favour the potential accession of specific countries like Serbia and, to some extent, Montenegro, provided that they fulfil the Copenhagen criteria, rather than treating the Western Balkans as a single entity. A series of reports and studies seem to confirm this view, suggesting that a part of the Serbian community in Austria has increasingly espoused the FPÖ's anti-migrant views—somewhat paradoxically, given its status as the second largest migrant community in the country.

Particularly under its former leader and former vice-Chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache, the FPÖ courted Serbian votes by opposing Kosovo's independence and appealing to anti-Muslim sentiment among Orthodox Christian Serbs.¹¹⁵ Strache promised to reverse Austria's recognition of Kosovo, although he did not do so during in 2017-2019, when the ÖVP was part of the government coalition and he himself served as vice-Chancellor. The strategy sought to resonate with the over 100,000 Austrian citizens of Serbian origin. Despite these efforts, analysis conducted in 2020 by the Austrian market research company OGM showed that the FPÖ had had only limited success. The Serbian community in Vienna largely remained loyal to the centre-left Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) in the general elections of 2019, with about 46% supporting the SPÖ. Only 9% of Viennese Serbs voted for the FPÖ, indicating that the party's outreach had not significantly altered established voting patterns.¹¹⁶

Nevertheless, the recent public interventions by key party figures, with Nepp and Krauss lambasting Kosovo as well as what they called the EU's double standards towards candidate states can, in part, be viewed through this prism: as a revamped effort to lure the Serbian community of over 100,000, which is considerable given Austria's total population of 9 million. This is indicative of a tendency to politicise EU enlargement for electoral gains.¹¹⁷

Understanding the challenge posed by Eurosceptic radical parties

Making sense of the challenge: The key strands in anti-enlargement stances

Post-Brexit, exiting the EU or the Euro has become a taboo topic for most radical right parties across Europe. In Western Europe, the only exception is the German AfD, as our analysis has demonstrated. Instead, EU membership now provides these parties with leverage to influence EU policies, particularly in areas such as migration, climate change, enlargement and support for Ukraine. Hungary's Viktor Orbán and his intergovernmental bargaining have demonstrated this new strategy in recent years.

Another interesting trend is the emergence of a new Euro-centric discourse among many far-right parties, which now position themselves as "Defenders of Europe". This includes rhetoric centred on preventing the "decline of Europe" and protecting European civilisation, and is more pronounced in parties like the SD and the RN and less so in the AfD and PVV. Recent studies describe this as "ethnoregionalism": focusing on the interests of the "European people" within a narrow geographic scope limited to current EU borders.¹¹⁸

Despite moderating their anti-EU rhetoric and refraining from questioning the merits of EU membership, the AfD, FPÖ, PVV, and RN continue to oppose EU enlargement, whereas the SD and VOX maintain a more lukewarm or ambiguous stance. In contrast, Fdl is strongly supportive of EU enlargement.

From the above findings, it is evident that there are certain overlaps in their rationales against the accession of new member states. However, this study revealed that not all parties place the same emphasis on the issue of EU enlargement or the EU project in general. The SD and VOX are notable examples: neither has a concrete or well-defined policy on EU enlargement and both lack a coherent and well-articulated stance on the topic. It is noteworthy that in Spain, a significant majority of the population supports EU enlargement, including the accession of the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova. In Sweden, the population is generally either indifferent or supportive. This contrasts with countries like Austria and Germany, where EU enlargement is a more contentious topic in the public arena.

Overall, these parties' stance on EU enlargement is underpinned by five main driving forces: **a. financial concerns, b. migration and security, c. foreign policy, d. popular support for enlargement and a strategy to win votes, and e. concerns over the functioning of the EU and the place/weight of their respective countries.**

- **Financial concerns**

Firstly, **these parties oppose the financial costs associated with the accession of economically less developed states.** The PVV, for example, centres its tough stance on a strongly "frugal" economic position, arguing that admitting poorer countries would place undue financial strain on the Netherlands and other net contributors. This argument is also cited by the French RN, Germany's AfD, the Swedish SD, and Austria's FPÖ. Notably, all of these parties come from countries that are already net contributors to the EU budget.

- **Migration & security**

Even though enlargement has not been particularly politicised in countries like the Netherlands, **it is intrinsically linked to migration and freedom of movement.** This issue is particularly sensitive to the Dutch public and is a key point in the PVV's agenda. In France, the RN links EU enlargement with the risk of increased illegal immigration and organised crime, thus aligning it with its domestic political agenda. Similarly, the AfD in Germany and FPÖ in Austria have consolidated their electoral base with their anti-migration agenda, which is focused on Muslim populations, and by citing the need for cultural preservation. In Austria, the FPÖ has opposed the accession of countries with significant Muslim populations, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina.

- **Foreign policy**

Furthermore, **foreign policy considerations and relations with Russia impact significantly on the stance certain radical right parties have taken to EU enlargement,** particularly regarding the potential accession of Ukraine and Moldova. The AfD, for example, maintains a more tolerant stance towards Russia and opposes the accession of countries like Ukraine and Moldova. Their anti-enlargement narrative includes concerns about importing ongoing conflicts into the EU, while denying any influence from the Kremlin. In contrast, Italy's ruling FdI party has a pro-Western, pro-NATO strategic orientation and is particularly critical of the Kremlin and its ongoing military campaign in Ukraine. By embracing a supportive stance towards Ukraine and maintaining Italy's pro-enlargement position, its leader, Giorgia Meloni, is seeking to legitimise her party on the international stage as a reliable partner in the eyes of Brussels and Washington. Similarly, the Sweden's SD have ramped up their anti-Russian rhetoric following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and have refrained from condemning the potential accession of Ukraine, despite their overall sceptical stance towards enlargement.

- **Popular support for enlargement and a strategy to win votes**

Public opinion and the domestic political landscape are key factors which influences these arguments and driving forces. In countries like Austria, Germany, and France, public opinion is largely against or sceptical of EU enlargement, which is associated with migration and employment issues. Despite this, the ruling coalitions in Austria and Germany maintain supportive stances towards enlargement, while parties like the FPÖ, AfD and RN capitalise on public scepticism to maximise their electoral gains. Demographics and the politics of the ethnic minority vote can also shape positions on enlargement. In Germany, the AfD strategically crafts its narrative to attract votes by focusing on issues that resonate with their potential target base, which includes Russian-Germans in states like Saxony. Additionally, the AfD is potentially targeting Croats and Serbs when it opposes the accession of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This tactic is not unique to Germany's AfD: in Austria, the FPÖ appeals to specific ethnic groups, such as the Serbs in Vienna, by promoting nationalistic sentiments such as "Kosovo is Serbia".

- **Concerns over the functioning of the EU**

Several of the parties in our study, including the RN, have tried to draw a parallel between a potential enlargement of the EU and the bloc's deepening. The latter could only come about through an institutional reform of the EU that could potentially include a shift towards QMV in areas like foreign policy—a move which Eurosceptic parties largely view in terms of EU capitals ceding their decision-making powers to Brussels, and thus of a potential loss of sovereignty. As explained in the next section, this reasoning has implications not just for EU enlargement, but also for the bloc's broader policy direction in the years ahead.

Interestingly, this anti-enlargement argument represents a novel trend that contrasts with the historical stance of anti-federalist forces (e.g. the UK). As pointed out earlier in this study, such forces have traditionally supported enlargement as a way to dilute closer integration and deeper federalism within the EU. This emerging trend marks a paradox in the history of the EU, reflecting a shift in how pro- and anti-integration actors view enlargement—no longer merely as a tool to resist deeper integration, but potentially as a threat to sovereignty.

As it is evident from the above analysis, radical parties do not all share the five drivers for enlargement nor do they all place equal measure of significance to them. The following table summarises the positions of the parties examined and classifies the parties according to the relative strength in their domestic political scene:

Party	Coalition Status	Stance on EU Enlargement	Key Drivers / Rationale
AfD (Germany)	Opposition	Anti	<p>Financial concerns: Opposes funding more net-recipient states</p> <p>Migration & security: Argues enlargement (esp. Western Balkans, Ukraine) brings organised crime & illegal immigration</p> <p>Foreign policy: Pro-Russia stance, opposes Ukraine's accession</p> <p>Electoral calculations: Sceptical electorate in Eastern Germany; appeals to Russian-Germans/Serb diaspora</p> <p>Concerns over EU functioning: Strongly against any deeper integration/ shift towards QMV</p>
RN (France)	Opposition	Anti	<p>Financial concerns: Opposes spending on "poorer" new members</p> <p>Migration & security: Highlights risk of increased illegal immigration and organised crime</p> <p>Electoral calculations: Capitalises on public scepticism about enlargement</p> <p>Concerns over EU functioning: Opposes potential shift to QMV, fears loss of sovereignty</p>
Fdi (Italy)	Leading partner in government coalition (under PM Meloni)	Pro	<p>Migration & security: Ties support to migration control agreements</p> <p>Foreign policy: Pro-Western, critical of Russia, seeks to bolster international legitimacy</p> <p>Electoral calculations: Consolidates leadership within the right-wing coalition</p> <p>(Geo)economic interests: "Adriatic power" self-perception; trade & investment</p>
VOX (Spain)	Opposition (occasionally a	Lukewarm/ambiguous	<p>Low prioritisation: Enlargement is not a core issue; lacks a coherent public</p>

	partner in regional coalition governments)		stance Foreign policy: Some MEP vote against Ukraine/Moldova talks, but no explicit overarching position Electoral calculations: Domestic issues (migration, cost of living) take precedence; enlargement seldom featured in campaigns
PVV (Netherlands)	Junior partner in government coalition	Anti	Financial concerns: "Frugal" arguments against poorer net-recipient countries Migration & security: Strongly anti-immigration; sees free movement as a threat Foreign policy: Opposes Ukraine's accession; lumps it with general anti-enlargement stance Electoral calculations: Segments of Dutch public sceptical about migration and added budgetary burdens
SD (Sweden)	Support to a minority government	Lukewarm/ambiguous	Financial concerns: Prefers net-paying countries, wary of net recipients Migration & security: Doubts new members' capacity to control borders effectively Foreign policy: Recently pro-NATO, critical of Russia, but not pressing for further enlargement Electoral calculations: Enlargement not a major vote driver for SD Concerns over EU functioning: Questions EU's capacity to absorb more states
FPÖ (Austria)	Likely to lead next government coalition	Anti (Selective openness towards Serbia and Montenegro)	Financial concerns: Austria is a net contributor; wary of straining EU budget Migration & security: Strong anti-immigration platform Foreign policy: Orbán-friendly, criticises admitting "a country at war" (Ukraine)

			<p>Electoral calculations: Majority of Austrians are sceptical; FPÖ capitalises on that sentiment</p> <p>Concerns over EU functioning: Questions deeper integration</p>
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Implications for EU enlargement

Eurosceptic radical right parties across Europe have begun emulating Viktor Orbán’s model to increase their chances of assuming power. Notably, compared to previous decades, these radical right-wing Eurosceptic parties are increasingly engaging in the EU public debate, aiming to set their terms and shape policies in various areas. Rather than being purely reactive, they now actively participate in discussions, particularly on migration and climate issues, reflecting a strategic shift towards influencing EU policies from within. This approach has recently helped parties of this sort to become part of government coalitions, most notably the PVV in the Netherlands.

Against this backdrop, enlargement could be used as a bargaining chip in future negotiations, with Eurosceptic parties potentially leveraging the issue to extract concessions or delay deeper integration measures. Current support from parties like the Sweden Democrats is ambiguous and largely conditional. However, far-right and radical right parties emphasise national sovereignty and resist transferring more decision-making power to Brussels. As the enlargement process advances, their positions may shift, likely to opposing measures such as extending QMV and treaty changes.

For years, Hungary under Orbán has made effective use of EU processes (e.g. unanimity in enlargement talks) to extract unrelated concessions in other areas of perceived national interest. The practice of seeking unanimity at every stage of the enlargement process allows countries like Hungary to use it as a bargaining tool. Under the Fdi, Italy could in the future follow that path. As shown above, unlike other like-minded Eurosceptic parties, which resist further enlargement, the Fdi views the ongoing accession process as a means to bolster Italy's influence both within the EU and the candidate states themselves. Meloni’s government has already partly used its support for EU enlargement as a tool for striking migration-related deals, such as outsourcing border management to non-EU Albania. Keeping accession candidates in the "waiting room" could be seen as beneficial for striking deals that push migration management responsibilities onto those countries, especially given the political sensitivity of managing migration and its prominence on the agendas of these radical right parties.

Although there has been no decisive alteration in the balance of power at the European Parliament level, where a pro-EU coalition of mainstream parties maintains a fragile majority, radical right wing parties across Europe have been

gaining traction. More significantly, their rise at the national level and involvement in governmental coalitions affects the composition and dynamics of both the European Council and the Council of Ministers, crucial bodies both when it comes to setting high-level policy agendas and adopting EU laws. As EU enlargement largely hinges on political will, it is the Council that ultimately has the determining role.

Public support for EU enlargement is notably lower in Western EU member states where radical right parties hold sway, including France, Austria, and the Netherlands. **The inclusion of far-right parties in national coalitions, such as Wilders' PVV in the Netherlands, may amplify scepticism towards enlargement among mainstream ruling parties.** This could lead to stricter EU enlargement criteria, potentially hampering the accession of certain candidate states, and especially those with significant Muslim populations, and imposing more obstacles for candidate states. **Hence, decision-making on EU enlargement could be influenced by the surge of radical right parties, especially as they join governmental coalitions or act as leading opposition forces.**

Despite softening their rhetoric, most radical right parties in Western Europe remain fundamentally Eurosceptic or anti-EU, opposing the expansion of a Union they criticise. This has significant implications for the future of EU enlargement. While some parties, like Italy's FdI, support enlargement, the majority remain either sceptical or against.

The strategy implemented by the UK for decades sought to leverage horizontal expansion to counter deeper integration, preventing steps towards federalism. In recent years, Orbán, another staunch anti-federalist, has favoured EU enlargement, at least with regard to the Western Balkans, a region where he has cultivated strong ties with local leaders. Having like-minded leaders like Vucic, the Serbian President, in the European Council would enable a "blocking minority" capable of further hindering EU reforms and promoting a "Europe of nation-states". To a certain extent, the FdI's own position in favour of enlargement could be seen in this light, given its focus on nativism and national sovereignty, along with its own commercial, investment, and security interests in several candidate states, primarily in the Western Balkans.

The emphasis radical right parties place on national sovereignty makes them wary of transferring more decision-making power to Brussels and strongly resistant to measures like the introduction of QMV and/or treaty changes. Further enlargement would potentially lead to a Union with over 30 member states; inevitably, this raises questions regarding the governability and efficiency of an already often dysfunctional decision-making structure.¹¹⁹ As mentioned above, internal EU reforms of the sort championed by President Macron in France and the German "traffic lights" coalition are viewed as essential for the effective integration of new members. Most of the internal reforms (e.g. QMV, reforming CAP and the MFF) championed by the French-German expert report on EU institutional reform would expand EU's competences in various policy areas. However, the growing influence of radical right parties could further stall

these reform efforts, which have already been challenged by mainstream parties in smaller member states.

According to a paper produced by the secretariat of the EU Council and leaked to the *Financial Times* in September 2023, the accession of nine more member states could end up costing existing member states over €256 billion, while all member states would have to contribute more to the EU regular budget and receive less from it. It also acknowledged that several existing member states would turn from net recipients to net contributors. As the largest country in the group of nine candidate member states, Ukraine could be entitled to up to €186 billion over the seven years covered by the EU's long-term budget (MFF), with nearly half the funds directed at agriculture, according to the same paper. However, these economic estimates remain provisional and are subject to potential revisions based on factors such as negotiations, shifts in EU priorities, or updated financial assessments.¹²⁰ Furthermore, by placing too much focus on the narrow budgetary aspects of enlargement, the discussion largely overlooks the economic, political and/or strategic costs of non-enlargement.¹²¹ Regardless of whether such estimates are precise or tend to omit potential counter-benefits for existing member states, they could be used by Eurosceptic and populist forces to resist further enlargement on economic grounds, as certain parties in our case studies have already done.

If enlargement becomes a more tangible prospect, the opposition from these radical right parties is likely to intensify. The CAP has been a particularly sensitive area in EU policy, and especially vulnerable to misinformation and politicisation. Russian disinformation campaigns, for instance, have sought to create concerns about Ukraine's future EU membership by sowing doubt over its impact on European agriculture; focusing on the CAP, they have amplified misconceptions.¹²² Eurosceptic parties in Western Europe have then echoed these arguments, focusing on the risks to their agricultural sectors and linking enlargement with broader budgetary concerns. Faced with political pressure from their populations, more enlargement-friendly parties from the "political centre" would be tempted to adjust their agenda accordingly. Again, this is a trend we have seen in other areas of policy in recent years (e.g. migration).

Against this backdrop, a country worth keeping an eye on next year is Czechia. Although it has been a net recipient since its accession to the EU in 2004, it is likely to transition to a net contributor to the EU budget in the next MFF. The country is also poised to hold parliamentary elections during the second half of 2025, with the radical right ANO 2011 (which is also a member of the PfE in the European Parliament) is currently leading the polls and could join the future government coalition. As this study has shown, the PVV in the Netherlands provides the most recent example of a radical right party influencing a ruling coalition to harden its stance on EU enlargement.

Any major decisions impacting the functioning of the EU, including enlargement, still require unanimous agreement from all member states following primarily bargaining between member states. In many cases, certain countries are likely to hold national referenda before beginning any ratification process on

expansion. For example, in France, it has been constitutionally required since 2005 that any further accession must be approved by a referendum or a three fifths majority in both the French Senate and the National Assembly.¹²³ Even though it is not constitutionally mandatory for enlargement, Austria has the legal framework in place to hold referenda on issues of significant national interest. While there is no such constitutional provision in either the Netherlands or Sweden, Eurosceptic and anti-enlargement parties could apply political pressure for future referenda on the potential accession of new member states, especially as their electoral sway increases. Such referenda could also provide these forces with fertile ground to exaggerate the perceived risks and costs of EU enlargement.

A recent survey conducted across all 27 EU member states by Leuven-based Ipsos on behalf of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies revealed that a substantial majority of EU citizens (65%) support having a direct vote on which candidate states could be allowed to join the bloc. However, this does not necessarily equate to a pro-enlargement stance; rather, it could also serve as a tool for Eurosceptic groups to potentially block any further expansion of the Union.¹²⁴ All the above indicate that enlargement is poised for further politicisation in the years ahead, potentially even in member states where it has yet to feature in the national political dialogue.

The Trump factor

Finally, even though this study has largely focused on internal EU dynamics and the rise of radical right parties dictating much of the enlargement discourse, it is important to note that external geopolitical trends, particularly potential seismic shifts in US foreign policy, could exacerbate the complexity surrounding EU enlargement. Donald Trump's return to office could have ramifications for the enlargement process on various levels. For example, a second Trump administration is highly likely to take a more transactional approach to transatlantic relations, exacerbating US-EU disagreements over NATO funding, trade issues, and the role of multilateral organisations. This might encourage Eurosceptic and nationalist leaders in both EU member and candidate states, providing them with a justification for undermining Brussels' authority and delaying the institutional reforms required for successful enlargement.

Local nationalist leaders in Western Balkan states, such as Serbia's Aleksandar Vucic or Milorad Dodik, the President of the Republika Srpska, could feel empowered to pursue more assertive policies driven by nationalist, secessionist or expansionist agendas. This might include delaying reforms necessary for EU accession or intensifying nationalist rhetoric that deepens internal divisions and heightens regional tensions. Encouraged by Trump's transactional approach, candidate states may de-prioritise reforms in governance, the Rule of Law, and democratic standards. Leaders might view alignment with US interests as a counterbalance to EU conditionality, reducing incentives to adhere to stringent EU criteria.

Ukraine and Moldova's EU accession pathways are heavily reliant on Western unity, and the US-EU partnership in particular, being sustained. A Trump administration potentially less supportive of Ukraine in its war with Russia and more focused on bilateral deals could weaken EU confidence in the long-term security framework needed to integrate these states. Radical right parties in member states could exploit Trump's reduced commitment to Ukraine to argue against EU enlargement in favour of Realpolitik. They might frame Ukraine and Moldova's accession as a financial burden and a security risk, reinforcing their opposition to expansion.

The European public, influenced by radical right narratives, might question the feasibility of integrating Ukraine and Moldova due to the high economic and political costs associated with their accession. Radical right parties in member states could exploit a Trump-aligned geopolitical environment to enhance their domestic and European credibility. By associating themselves with Trump's nationalist rhetoric and policies, they could appeal to voters disillusioned with traditional pro-EU parties.

Alternatively, the increased prominence of Eurosceptic rhetoric could deepen divisions within the EU. Radical right parties in member states could align their agendas with nationalist Western Balkan leaders, potentially lobbying for weaker EU oversight of accession criteria. Simultaneously, such shifts may decrease the EU's clout over aspiring states, hampering efforts to bring them into line with the Union's democratic, legal, and economic criteria. This could prompt Brussels to emphasise short-term geopolitical stability over the EU's normative commitments to democracy and the Rule of Law. In this scenario, the threat of a less cohesive EU reacting to external forces may accelerate the politicisation of enlargement.

The growing influence of Eurosceptic parties emboldened by external geopolitical shifts could also obstruct necessary institutional reforms within the EU. Without such reforms or revising budget contributions, enlargement would face additional politically sensitive obstacles, further delaying integration.

The path forward

Overall, the impact of radical right parties at the national level, particularly in the European Council and the Council of Ministers, can significantly shape high-level policy decisions, including those related to enlargement. The rise of these parties presents a significant challenge, as enlargement intersects with other critical issues such as migration, the CAP and cohesion policy, all of which are particularly sensitive to their voter base and have substantial budgetary implications for the EU. These parties are therefore likely to oppose the necessary reforms and deeper integration associated with enlargement. Additionally, more mainstream parties with an official pro-enlargement stance might be tempted to follow suit to avoid losing votes to these radical right parties.

As these parties continue to influence both national and European politics, monitoring their impact on EU policy and the broader European project will be

crucial. Balancing enlargement with internal reform will remain a challenge. This evolving political landscape will test the EU's ability to balance expansion against the required institutional reforms, potentially making enlargement a more contentious and politicised issue in the coming years. The interplay between internal EU dynamics, external pressures, and the growing influence of Eurosceptic forces is poised to shape the trajectory of enlargement in increasingly complex and contested ways.

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