

Europe at a Crossroads: Setting the Course for a Resilient Continent

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Amid a changing global order, the EU is striving for increased strategic self-determination to preserve its geopolitical autonomy and relevance vis-à-vis international partners and rivals. As a result, debates around internal reforms to maintain and increase the ability to act, as well as how to accelerate geostrategic enlargement while preserving its merit-based character have gained new traction in Brussels and beyond, but so far often fail to align. As this policy brief argues, a strategic shift is needed to reconcile both goals and make them mutually reinforcing.

Introduction

Up until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia since February 2022 and the subsequent requests for membership from Kyiv, Chişinău and Tbilisi, EU enlargement had been largely dormant for almost a decade, with little prospect of any of the (potential) candidates in the Western Balkans – let alone Türkiye – joining anytime soon. Although the European Commission (EC) had declared enlargement a “geostrategic investment” as early as 2018[1], there was little readiness to invest substantive political capital, and elites in many member and candidate countries had settled comfortably in the status quo.

With Ukraine and Moldova advancing quickly under unprecedented challenges, Montenegro and Albania seizing the new momentum, and Iceland debating a return to accession negotiations, the growth of the Union in the coming decade seems inevitable. At the same time, member states agree that the EU itself needs to evolve to be able to tackle existing and emerging challenges amid a changing global order, from security and defense to interconnectivity, trade flows, and supply chains.

So far, little consensus has emerged among member states on how to reform and enlarge the EU effectively apart from agreeing that both processes should go hand in hand. The EC has proposed and implemented several strategies to include enlargement candidates in new and ongoing initiatives and accelerate their alignment with key policy areas often subsumed under the term ‘gradual integration’. However, they are not systematically embedded in the debates, and potentials for a whole-of-continent approach are yet to develop their ample potential.

Reforming Institutions

With enlargement gaining new momentum, debates on internal reforms reemerged with renewed urgency as well, emphasizing the need not only for the candidates but also the EU to get ready. Building on the 2023 State of the Union address and Granada declaration, both of which emphasized the need for parallel reform and enlargement, the EC in spring 2024 announced comprehensive **pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews**, focusing on values, policies, budget, and governance to be negotiated alongside the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the term 2028-2034.[2] However, the proposals, originally announced for early 2025 were repeatedly delayed and the discussion has increasingly fragmented.

Although there is a broad consensus that EU-decision making is currently inefficient and too slow, many national governments oppose far-reaching structural reforms and treaty changes which might limit their influence in Brussels. A group of countries – France, Germany, Italy, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, as well as the Nordic and Benelux states – advocates for **extending the use of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV)** to policy fields that currently require unanimity, a change which is possible under the current treaties but requires unanimity.

Others demand a comprehensive reduction of bureaucracy to boost competitiveness after warnings from former Italian prime ministers Draghi and Letta, resulting in the production of several 'omnibus' packages by the EC. Still others want better coordination between the EU institutions, notably the EC and the Council, suggesting either shrinking structures or adding new positions.

In parallel, policy fields that were traditionally not part of the EU's portfolio gain prominence, most notably security and defense, with a dedicated Commissioner and the new Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument for joint procurement. With progress on the EU level obstructed by a lack of common vision, the so-called E6 countries France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Spain decided to advance key shared priorities outside the EU 27 format. While some see this as an attempt towards a '**multi-speed Europe**' in which some countries take the lead and others can take more time or opt out entirely, **Enhanced Cooperation** as provided in the treaties requires at least nine EU members, and the areas covered by the E6 so far are limited. Nonetheless, with the prospect of a Union of more than 30 states, internal differentiation is likely to increase.

Evidently, as the current treaties allow for flexible adjustments and there is no shortage of proposals, the real obstacle is a **lack of political will and consensus** by the current member states to overcome key blockages. Conversely, this impasse increases anxieties in those member states advocating reforms that any new enlargement would worsen the dilemma. In response to candidates advancing independently of the reform debate, these countries are looking for other ways of preventing trouble after accession through new safeguards in the upcoming accession treaties for Montenegro as a blueprint for future enlargements. However, experts doubt that ideas such as suspending bilateral vetoes would really serve this purpose and point out threats to the integration of new countries if these are treated like second-class members.

Thinking Enlarged: Strengthening European Strategic Autonomy

While enlargement has spurred new debates on preparing the EU for emerging challenges, they have thus not evolved into a strategic review, let alone realignment. Rather than replacing the reform debate through accession treaties, however, new research suggests that **enlargement can serve as a catalyst for change**. The most compelling case is made for the future of European security and defense readiness, spanning not only military but also information security, infrastructure, connectivity, and civil protection. Ukraine's military is among the most advanced and experienced in Europe, while Moldova's experience in countering hybrid threats is unmatched, with both countries already included in key initiatives and agreements.

Less attention is usually given to the **potential of the Western Balkans** candidates, although they harbor important resources for joint security. A striking example is their inclusion in EU debates and policies around migration through the so-called 'Balkan route' during the crisis in 2016. Actual integration into the EU mechanisms and meaningful inclusion on eye level effectively halted large-scale immigration through the route. At the same time, the lack of integration into common asylum procedures left a lot of people stranded at EU borders under inhumane conditions, dramatically demonstrating the downsides of selective integration.

Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia are already part of NATO while Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina concluded Partnerships for Peace (P4P) agreements, while Kosovo seeks closer ties but is not recognized by four NATO members (all of the EU countries). All of the countries support EU missions under the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) to which four out of the six countries have fully aligned themselves.

Most countries meet or exceed NATO spending demands on their military, and **around 200 companies already produce military equipment**, chiefly in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, complimented by plans of other governments to ramp up domestic production which is likely to be much cheaper than in other part of Europe. Bosnia-Herzegovina alone already produce up to 500,000 artillery shells per year, with recent US investments likely to double this number within 2026.

In addition, **key transport corridors**, connecting the Albanian port of Durrës through North Macedonia to the Bulgarian port of Varna and the Greek port of Igoumenitsa with Central Europe through North Macedonia and Serbia. However, the countries are not fully integrated in relevant funding schemes which raises costs and limits compensations for them which also limits the benefits to EU countries. For example, the SAFE instrument is open to participation of candidates, but not to procurement in their countries, making participation less attractive and excluding often more affordable gear produced in the region.[3]

While bilateral agreements such as on energy between Italy and Albania already exist, there is **no systematic inclusion of the region in strategic debates**, despite the framing of including it as 'geostrategic investment'. The same is true for other pressing topics such as competitiveness. In his report, Enrico Letta makes an explicit link between the consolidation of the Single Market, enlargement, and defense, supporting closer coordination and gradual integration of candidates, using safeguards and transition periods to protect EU interests while accelerating alignment.[4] Growth Plans for the Western Balkans and Moldova, as well as the Ukraine Facility largely follow this logic but fall short of meaningfully embed them in broader strategic debates on the future of the Single Market, competitiveness and enhanced strategic autonomy.

Another area where candidate countries could play an important role and which is also included in the E6 plans is the supply of **Critical Raw Materials** (CRM) and Rare Earth Elements (REE). All of the countries hold relevant primary and secondary deposits of key minerals and have a long mining tradition, but most of the mines are either owned by or export to China and Turkey. Conversely, they often lack adequate legislation and oversight, making them a hazard to environment and health. In the context of EU enlargement, a comprehensive reform process can be incentivized with new investments, serving mutual benefits and closer alignment.[5] For example, North Macedonia's substantial nickel deposits remain unexploited, and the copper reserves that could cover more than a quarter of EU demands currently go mostly to China.

The presence of geopolitical competitors in the accession countries further align the urgency of deeper strategic integration which is further exacerbated by the confrontative US politics under President Trump. Fully **decoupling from Russia, de-risking from China and diversifying from the US** requires increased cooperation across the continent and a better understanding of the potentials and risks in all European countries. Opening more paths for participation for those states willing to contribute, including them in strategic debates and technological advancement, and align the enlargement and reform principles accordingly serve mutual benefits and show governments and citizens on all sides that they are key actors in determining Europe's future.

Future-proofing Europe in a World of Shifting Geopolitics

While the need to streamline the enlargement goals rather than having an isolated debate is accepted by some in Brussels and a few in other capitals, implementation has so far been fragmented. The four most advanced Western Balkans candidates – Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia – are included in the annual Rule of Law Reports since 2024.

The EU Democracy Shield and Civil Society Strategy presented in 2025 also include the accession and neighborhood countries. In various cases, member states meetings were designated “informal” to allow for the participation of candidates, notably frontrunner Montenegro, while a first informal General Affairs Council (GAC) under the Cypriot presidency in March 2026 had to be cancelled due to security concerns following the bombing of Iran and retaliation.

However, continuous crises and not least the ‘big bang’ enlargement of 2004/2007 have left its marks on the EU as well, leaving many member states cautious about big changes and strategic shifts during a time when the Union is threatened from outside and inside like never before. More money and new strategies cannot replace trust and a common political culture which takes a long time to develop and consequently shift. And yet, under current structures and decision-making mechanisms, the EU is far too often reactive rather than proactive, with member states and EU institutions providing funds and diplomatic support in the background but rarely setting the tone of the debate, including on its own future in the US-brokered talks with Russia. Due to the unanimity principle in foreign policy, the block is increasingly accused of double standards for failing to hold Israel accountable for crimes in Gaza or mixed reactions to the abduction of Venezuela’s president Nicolás Maduro, including for fears of further US withdrawal.

The detachment of US politics from Europe is bound to continue, regardless of Donald Trump’s successor, begging first and foremost questions of future joint defense and security frameworks which are less dependent on Washington. The first step towards a common vision is increased **strategic foresight** to prepare for multiple concrete scenarios and already now increase resilience to internal and external shocks, as well as to direct investments beyond short-term goals within national policy cycles while retaining flexibility to (re-)act.

Another threat emanating from multiple directions, including the MAGA movement but chiefly Russia, is that of democratic erosion. This also requires Europe to change the image it has of itself – rather than leading emerging countries into democracy and prosperity alongside the US, the EU today is an exception and requires active and urgent measures to defend its standards and values. But fears of growing influence by external actors and domestic populists too often lead of governments focusing on preservation rather than much-needed innovations.

A key resource which is currently largely underused is the **involvement of citizens** in various stages of the policy cycle. This can serve three main purposes: firstly, it would increase transparency and trust among societies and thereby legitimacy and accountability. Secondly, it strengthens democracy and directly challenges populist narratives, involving people directly into complex deliberative processes and fostering their understanding of governance. And thirdly, it could help increase confidence of European policy makers themselves and provide inputs to develop a future vision for their countries and continents.[6] So far, permanent citizens assemblies mostly exist on the local or regional level, but with a multitude of formats and experiences providing a solid basis, existing models can be used and further developed to serve diverse goals and contexts.

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE) in 2022 was widely hailed as a first step in the direction of creating a European *polis* but fell short of delivering meaningful and lasting results. While continent-wide formats can serve to increase visibility, a more decentralized model with international exchanges seems more promising, where regional or national councils exchange with each other or send representatives. Debates can be targeted directly at different topics and institutions, with inputs from policy makers and experts and early integration already during the planning phase.

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Conclusion & Recommendations

Long-standing institutions hold together the EU in turbulent times, making many decision-makers wary to cause further instability by embarking on comprehensive reforms, even while they acknowledge that the current institutions and processes are not effective amid ongoing challenges – let alone future ones. The need for consolidating the Single Market toward long-term increased competitiveness, strengthening European security and defense, diversifying and near-shoring supply chains, and protecting the democratic values gluing it all together are urgent and overwhelmingly complex challenges that seem insurmountable in the face of internal and external forces offering seemingly easy answers and ‘alternative facts’. Without substantial leadership and guidance, the EU risks becoming a mere administrator in the background of its member states’ increasingly fierce domestic and international struggles.

And yet, there are good news as well. EU foreign policy has become more forward-looking and decisive in the wake of the Russian aggression, with quicker responses, more flexibility, and new energy to strategic debates.[8] However, much more political capital and urgency are needed to make the continent more united, more resilient, more autonomous, and ultimately more powerful in defending not only its territory but its values and achievements as well. Undoubtedly, a strategic shift is needed, benefitting a political culture of compromise in which long-term planning and flexibility do not exclude each other. This requires:

1. Closer cooperation among like-minded partners inside and outside the EU, chiefly the enlargement countries and other neighbors that are already closely aligned. Integrating them early on can release unexpected potential, deepen trust, and foster integration.
2. Integrated planning rather than discussions in silos, streamlining key policy priorities such as competitiveness, enlargement, and security so that they can reinforce each other.
3. Leadership and openness to new coalitions while safeguarding fundamental principles. In an EU of 30+ members, further differentiation is likely inevitable, but instead of prophesizing disintegration, decision-makers can now lay the groundwork to ensure these benefits rather than harms the EU’s abilities as a global actor.
4. Better communication with and inclusion of citizens on different levels of governance and policy. This is key to building trust and confidence, and to shaping narratives of the future instead of losing further ground to populists and their global allies who aim at dismantling the EU’s core values. Again, including candidates and other aligned partners is key to long-term success and the consolidation of a new strategic culture.

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