

# Shaping the Future of Europe

Hungary's Vision for the 2024 Presidency



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# A CONSISTENT AND MERIT-BASED ENLARGEMENT POLICY

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One of the top priorities of the Hungarian EU presidency is ensuring a consistent and merit-based enlargement policy. In fact, it has set the goal to go down in history as the most pro-enlargement presidency of all time. The government has long been an outspoken advocate for enlargement and considers it one of the most successful policies of the European Union. To maintain the policy's momentum, however, it is essential to keep it balanced and credible ("Programme of the Hungarian Presidency," 2024).

The Community cannot be complete without the accession of the six Western Balkan countries, which is why the Western Balkans has been seen as the primary direction for enlargement, with the EU long engaged in ensuring its European integration. The region's integration benefits the EU not only in security and geopolitical terms but also in terms of untapped economic potential. Further accession of the Eastern Partnership countries aspiring for membership—that is Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and most recently Armenia—would significantly strengthen the EU, expanding its access to human and natural resources. The presidency is moving the enlargement process forward in line with the revised methodology of 2020 set forth by Olivér Várhelyi, EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement at the time, based on the reports of the European Commission, while also taking into account the European Union's capacity to absorb new members ("Programme of the Hungarian Presidency," 2024).

## EU ENLARGEMENT AT A CROSSROADS

A credible enlargement policy is a geostrategic investment in Europe's peace, stability, security and prosperity. A strong and stable European neighborhood is a key priority for the European Union, and the Hungarian presidency



considers enlargement one of the most powerful tools for achieving this. The geopolitical significance of enlargement was highlighted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, after which the European Council recognized its role in enhancing European security and therefore granted Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia candidate status (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations [DG NEAR], 2023b). It should be noted, however, that while enlargement is back on the EU's agenda, this is due to the recent geopolitical reality of Europe, rather than a consistent enlargement policy whereby the Community would prioritize the Western Balkans over the Associated Trio.

It is undesirable for enlargement policy to be taken hostage by EU members' own interests and corrupted into a means to interfere in candidate states' sovereignty and domestic affairs. The Hungarian presidency strives for a merit-based approach, focusing on the actual performance and regional realities of candidate countries rather than double standards in applying accession criteria and submitting candidate states' fundamental economic and security needs to the geopolitical goals of great powers. Thus, Hungary continues to see the fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria as a condition for accession, namely institutional stability guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law and human rights, the protection and respect of minority rights, a functioning and competitive market economy, and the capacity to adopt EU *aquis* and thus to fulfill the political and economic objectives of the Union ("Accession criteria").

While enlargement policy is considered one of the EU's most successful policies, never has so much time passed between two rounds of enlargement, with the last accession that of Croatia in 2013. The reason for this is multifaceted. The EU has essentially found itself in a series of crises—financial crises, the migration crisis, Brexit, the war in Ukraine, energy and supply chain challenges—which has meant that engagement with the candidate countries has taken a back seat. At the same time, the Community's so-called enlargement fatigue has affected the attitude of the candidate countries, calling into question reciprocity on both sides. As a result, reform efforts have slowed and even stalled.

What has perhaps stalled enlargement the most is the EU reform versus enlargement debate among EU members. As cliché as it may seem, deepening the EU has always gone hand in hand with enlargement, with the adoption of the Amsterdam and Nice treaties before the 2004 "big bang" as good examples.

The EU now has 27 Member States, with the result that there are many more ideological fault lines between members, with a proportional reduction in the possibility of reaching consensus. It should be noted that the need to reform the EU is not new, and its timeliness is not directly caused by the failure of enlargement policy, nor is it explicitly intended to speed up the enlargement process. The need for reform was first formulated at the Conference on the Future of Europe initiated by French President Emmanuel Macron, with the central questions being the possible deepening of integration—a more federal Europe versus a Europe of sovereign nations—and the need to make the EU more effective and proactive as a global power. This led to the debate on qualified majority voting (QMV) in the field of common foreign and security policy, but the majority of Member States reject a complete transition to QMV as it would mean a loss of sovereignty. In essence, the conclusion of reform agendas that dissect the functioning of the EU is that its ability to function effectively is in doubt and will only decrease with the enlargement of not only the Western Balkan six, but Ukraine as well, which cannot join a properly functioning Community in its current form. Current political interests suggest that there will be reform before enlargement, but it is unclear whether reform is possible in the current political situation, with the present stalemate. It should be underlined that enlargement of the Western Balkans could be achieved without internal reform, but the larger EU Member States (e.g., France) are voting in favor of reform before enlargement (Zweers et al., 2024).

## THE WESTERN BALKANS AS THE PRIMARY DIRECTION OF ENLARGEMENT

It has been 21 years since the famous—now infamous—Thessaloniki promise to give the Western Balkans an EU perspective, underlining the Balkans' future within the European Union (European Commission, 2003). In that time, only Croatia managed to join the EU as a full-fledged member, while the accession of the other (potential) candidate countries—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia—has slowed, as illustrated by the slower progress on accession chapters. Perhaps the most extreme example is the situation of North Macedonia: The country applied for candidate status in 2004, the earliest after Croatia, and was granted candidate status in 2005, but the European Council did not approve



the start of accession negotiations until 2022—which still does not mean that accession negotiations will actually start (European Commission, 2024a). This is the result of vetoes by members in the wake of bilateral conflicts, with Greece for many years opposing EU membership over the Greek–Macedonian name dispute and, once the Prespa agreement was ratified, Bulgaria vetoing over Macedonian identity and history. North Macedonia was not the only candidate to receive vetoes: The Netherlands and France also issued famous vetoes on the progress of countries when their accession was linked, citing rule of law shortcomings, which also affected the dynamics of enlargement.

The situation of the other (potential) EU candidate countries in the Western Balkans is less extreme, but not particularly different from the Macedonian example. With the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, the others had been granted candidate status by 2014, but the group was split and the region lagged behind the two frontrunners: Montenegro and Serbia. As we have already mentioned, the war in Ukraine brought tangible change in the EU integration of the Western Balkans, with small—and some larger—steps taken towards the accession of almost all countries. Albania and North Macedonia have been given the green light to start accession negotiations and hold their first intergovernmental conferences (DG NEAR, 2022). Bosnia and Herzegovina became a candidate country in December 2022—later than Ukraine—and the European Council voted to open accession negotiations in March 2024 (European Commission, 2024b). Kosovo’s application to gain candidacy was symbolic, but perhaps more important was the guarantee of the country’s long-delayed visa liberalization, which allows the country’s citizens to travel to the EU without a visa since January 1, 2024. In the case of Montenegro, which has been struggling with government crises for a long time, there has been no room for small steps. There was a sharp turn in autumn 2023 with the government led by Milojko Spajić. The new government’s firm objective is to conclude accession negotiations by 2027, and the country is on track to achieve this and obtain an Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) for Chapters 23 and 24, which caused a long period of stalemate (Popović, 2024). Serbia is currently one of the Gordian knots of the Western Balkans. The EU has not opened any new clusters with the former frontrunner since December 2021, and the slowdown is strongly interconnected with Serbia’s position on Ukraine, being the only Western Balkan country to not join the EU sanctions against Russia. With no change in alignment with the EU’s foreign and security policy expected, the prospects for progress for Belgrade have not just stagnated, but rather deteriorated.

Rather than addressing each of the Western Balkan countries individually, we will look at the situation along the lines of the factors that have most influenced, and often hindered, the region's accession to the EU, highlighting the consequences of enlargement fatigue and the reform efforts already described. The experience of the accession of the Central and Eastern European countries brought to the fore rule of law and institutional development expectations, which are monitored by interim benchmarks requiring unanimity from the European Council, which slow down the process dramatically, as the example of Montenegro illustrates. The challenge is linked both to enlargement fatigue and to the debate on the future of the EU. The unanimous adoption of all opening, intermediate and closing benchmarks gives member states a number of opportunities to block proceedings, the value of which in terms of sending a message to candidate countries is worth reflecting on (Németh & Orosz, 2023). The fading credibility of the enlargement process is not only visible at the political level, but also in society at large, reflected in growing Euroskepticism. It is worrying that skepticism towards the EU is growing, especially among younger generations in the Western Balkans ("Balkan Barometer," 2023).

The Western Balkan region is well known for its traditional bilateral conflicts, which also hinder the progress of the accession process. Unresolved issues can be divided into two groups: challenges when a candidate country is in dispute with an EU member state and tensions between the candidate countries themselves. Perhaps the best-known dispute with an EU member state was the Greek–Macedonian name dispute, which was soon replaced by a dispute with Bulgaria. The returning Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (*Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство*, VMRO-DPMNE) strongly criticized the Prespa Agreement after entering the government following presidential and parliamentary elections in the spring of 2024, but it is not expected to revive the dispute with Greece and may even come closer to ending tensions with Bulgaria, but this will require internal and external pressure (Keranov & Metodieva, 2024). Less often in the spotlight is the current spat between Greece and Albania over the arrest of an Albanian mayor belonging to the Greek minority, with Athens threatening to use the veto as a handy tool for pressure (Taylor & Michalopoulos, 2024).

Yet the best-known bilateral conflict in the Balkans is the Kosovo issue. Although the EU has been acting as a facilitator since 2011 to bring the parties closer to a solution through the Belgrade–Pristina Dialogue, the normalization process is more frozen than dynamic. Political will on the part of Belgrade and Pristina is required to bring the dispute to an end, and as long as the leadership has more interest in maintaining the conflict than in resolving it, no cardinal change can be expected. The situation is not helped by the fact that Serbia’s Chapter 35 now includes the “Agreement on the path to normalization between Kosovo and Serbia” accepted in Brussels and Ohrid in 2023, under which Belgrade cannot block Kosovo’s integration into international organizations while Pristina moves towards the establishment of the Association of Serb Municipalities (*Zajednica srpskih opština*, ZSO; *Asociacioni i Komunave Serbe*, AKS). The stalemate was essentially preserved by the dispute over Kosovo’s membership of the Council of Europe, where Serbia voted against the young country’s admission, making clear its unchanged position on Kosovo (Taylor, 2024).

Along with these challenges, the conclusion is that the EU’s normative power in the region is diminishing as the prospect of EU membership becomes increasingly distant. This has further consequences, such as the growing presence and influence of external actors—China, Turkey, and the Gulf States—which are represented not only economically but also politically. Hungary has an interest in a united, pro-European Western Balkans, as it cannot afford the risk of instability in its southern neighborhood. The room for maneuver is much more limited than during the earlier presidency in 2011, however, as none of the Western Balkan countries are in a position to achieve spectacular success in the next six months. Hungary must instead continue to support consistent enlargement policy through small steps.

## CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR THE ASSOCIATED TRIO

Hungary has long been an outspoken supporter of EU enlargement towards the Eastern Partnership countries, too, and the presidency aims at championing the process. Meaningful accession talks with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are, however, hampered by serious challenges such as military conflicts,



insufficient alignment with the Copenhagen criteria, and an enlargement policy that is being held hostage to the geopolitical struggle of great powers and certain EU members' foreign policy agendas.

Hungary supports the right and the fight of the three candidate states to restore their territorial integrity and sovereignty through peaceful means. Although the Cyprus model may provide legal frameworks for the accession of candidates with disputed territories, accession of a country that is fighting a full-scale war on its territory means exporting the conflict to the economic-political bloc and is therefore undesirable. An established and secure framework for ceasefire should be set as a criterion for accession. Candidate states' fight against corruption and striving for the rule of law and human and minority rights are considered by the Hungarian presidency as other key premises for meaningful accession talks.

The question of Ukraine's accession to the European Union has become more than a mere foreign policy strategy. It has become a civilizational choice and a key foundation of national identity following the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014. Ukraine applied for EU membership soon after Russia invaded its territory in February 2022. The application was supported by the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European Council, and Ukraine was granted EU candidate status on June 23. On December 14, 2023, the Council of the European Union decided to open negotiations on Ukraine's accession, and in June 2024, negotiations kicked off in Luxembourg (Myso, 2024).

Hungary's commitment to NATO and the EU means that it supports Ukraine in all EU integration processes, maintains high-level bilateral economic cooperation and does not deviate from EU and NATO guidelines on strategic geopolitical issues of major importance. On the other hand, Hungary is also bound by its constitutional obligation to stand up for the rights of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia in Western Ukraine. According to Hungary's National Security Strategy (Government decree no. 1163/2020), Hungary has an interest in a strong, democratic, stable and economically developing Ukraine and in balanced bilateral relations. Accordingly, Hungary does not wish to put obstacles in the way of Ukraine's European path. At the same time, the EU integration of individual candidate countries should be based primarily on realistic achievements and not solely on momentary political grounds, taking into account current geostrategic interests.



Ukraine is paying the highest price for its commitment to its European integration course, but whether the country and the EU itself are ready for its accession remains a question. Ukraine is indeed making considerable efforts to meet the accession criteria, but in a country at war it is very difficult to properly measure the results. A series of economic reforms have brought Kyiv closer to European levels, but despite these, the Ukrainian economy continues to face very serious challenges, with agricultural exports remaining one of the largest sources of income. The situation is similar in terms of the implementation of legislative and administrative criteria, where Ukraine has reached a number of achievements, such as the decentralization of power and judicial reforms, but full compliance is still a long way off, as the latter is a complex process.

The most complex issue is meeting the political criteria. Taking these into account, Ukraine has adopted a number of laws and regulations aimed at promoting democracy and the rule of law and reducing corruption. War and national security considerations, however, make it very difficult to assess these effectively, as the state of war makes democratic institutions such as the freedom of the press, freedom of expression and political diversity difficult to achieve, and the erosion of these standards is a consequence of the war. From the Hungarian point of view, one of the biggest problems is the issue of the linguistic rights of national communities, which was a serious factor in the conflict between Budapest and Kyiv. In December 2023, Ukraine amended some of its laws to give national communities broader rights to use their languages in education and the media. To assess these measures, the parties held a bilateral meeting in January 2024, but as of August 2024, discussions are still ongoing between Budapest and Kyiv (Presidential Office of Ukraine, 2024).

The key question for Ukraine is whether, in the current complex geopolitical context, the principle of merit-based integration can be overridden if the political interest that currently justifies it so requires. Hungary, as before, is currently interested in Ukraine's integration into the EU, but Ukraine must be ready to meet the criteria to enter the EU, and the EU must be ready to welcome Ukraine.

Just like Ukraine's, the Hungarian presidency supports Moldova's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and accession to the European Union. The country applied for EU membership after the Russian aggression in Ukraine in March 2022 and was granted EU candidate status in June the same year.

Its accession process has so far been tied to Ukraine's—the EU's decision to open negotiation talks with Moldova was made together with the decision to open talks with Ukraine in December 2023, with actual negotiations kicking off parallel to Ukraine's in June 2024. Though there have been no delays yet with regards to the accession path of these two candidates, Hungary opposes binding together two or more candidates' accession processes for fears it may create setbacks for one or the other. Moldova should advance at its own pace, possibly even preceding Ukraine.

The Hungarian presidency believes that a democratic, functional and pluralistic political system with respect to the rule of law should be carefully maintained, and the irreversible concentration of power referencing the war should be avoided in Moldova. It is crucial for Chișinău to secure the actual inclusion of civil society into decision making, to ensure substantial pluralism of media and to carry out a reform of the judicial system according to the rule of law. It is also of key importance to carry out a reform of the handling of public funds and the fight against organized crime and money laundering to eliminate the political and public notions of corruption—the “theft of the century,” the organized robbery of Moldovan banks, must not happen again.

Just as in the case of Ukraine, it is essential for Moldova to protect human and national minority rights by protecting Moldova's multiethnic society's status quo and maintaining national identities, linguistic and cultural diversity, and the freedom of religion. Promoting the social wellbeing of national minorities and supporting integration, however, cannot mean the encouragement of—or coercion into—assimilation. Promoting national minorities' role in political decision making, respecting the existing rights of national minorities, and, among other things, respecting the territorial autonomy of Gagauzia are of key importance, particularly since the last is included in the country's constitution and in a special law.

Accession to the EU will not necessarily set back conflict resolution in Transnistria and could even enhance it. The Cyprus model may serve as a framework for peaceful negotiations given that the special status of the territory as an inalienable part of Moldova is guaranteed, as defined in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) negotiation format.

Georgia's accession path is an example of how certain European states' own foreign political agendas might derail enlargement policy, a common European goal with strategic importance. The Caucasian state, too, applied



for EU membership in March 2022. The Commission assessed it in record speed, just under three months, giving Georgia a European perspective in June 2022. The Commission's Opinion outlined twelve priorities for Georgia to implement in order to gain candidate status. Although the Georgian government successfully carried out all the proposals, it was denied candidate status by the Council of the European Union in December 2022 to put political pressure on a government reluctant to give up more of its sovereignty and conservative values for the sake of European integration (DG NEAR, 2023a). The move was condemned by Hungary.

Although Georgia was eventually granted candidate status in December 2023, six months later the German government effectively froze its accession path in retaliation for the Georgian parliament's adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence. Although the law was created in the spirit of transparency, a fundamental democratic value, the EU has harshly criticized it for being anti-democratic. The law requires NGOs and media outlets to publish a financial declaration and register themselves on a list if more than 20 percent of their budget is supplied by foreign sources. It was opposed by, most notably, countries that supplied most of the funds to the Georgian media and civil society: Germany and the United States ("Law of Georgia," 2024). Hungary instead considers foreign interference in the domestic affairs of candidates or members, such as legislation on civil society or media, undemocratic and has therefore opposed any collective steps taken by the EU to sanction Georgia for its law on transparency.

Germany's veto of Georgia's accession sets a dangerous precedent for member interference in domestic affairs and the sovereignty of candidate states, and it risks damaging the enlargement policy's credibility and equity. The Hungarian presidency is set to take substantial steps in favor of Georgia's accession path, and unless Germany's foreign policy takes a different turn, it will use all possible means to further Georgia's EU integration through the Eastern Partnership program or the European Political Community.

## CONCLUSION

The Hungarian presidency is all set to become one of the most pro-enlargement presidencies. It will strive to deconstruct artificial obstructions placed by certain members in the way of accession talks and fight the

hypocrisy and double standards that have taken the EU's enlargement policy hostage. The Hungarian presidency wants to move forward with most of the candidate countries, meaning to open new accession chapters for Serbia, close as many as possible with Montenegro, and lay the ground for the second intergovernmental conference in Albania and North Macedonia, while aiming to see the start of genuine negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia, too (Ördög, 2024).

There is no question of emphasizing a consistent and merit-based enlargement policy, but the policy must also be in line with geopolitical realities. This means not only moving towards the Associated Trio, but also recognizing and acting against the EU's competitors in its sphere of interest. This is particularly true for the Western Balkans, where it is essential to regain trust. One good way to do this is to lobby for a gradual integration, whereby we start to formally and informally bring candidate countries into the EU, while sending an important signal that we are also counting on them as full-fledged members.

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