EU Enlargement Revisited

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Introduction

The European Union's enlargement process has long symbolised, and proven itself to be one of its more powerful instruments for projecting stability, democracy and values beyond its borders. Yet since Croatia's accession in 2013, the process has stagnated significantly, raising questions about the EU's capacity and political will to expand and finalise the integration of new members. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represented a geopolitical shock, reviving the momentum around EU enlargement and adding an urgent geopolitical dimension to a framework originally designed around technical compliance with democratic and economic standards.

Moldova exemplifies this tension. Despite decades of institutional reform and gradual alignment with EU norms, the country struggled to advance beyond the margins of the EU's neighbourhood policy. The granting of candidate status in 2022 and the opening of accession negotiations in December 2023 represent a significant shift, driven as much by strategic

imperatives as by rule-based criteria. This duality poses a structural risk: when enlargement becomes an instrument of foreign policy rather than a merit-based process, it undermines both the credibility of the accession framework and the long-term sustainability of integration.

This policy brief first examines the criteria of EU enlargement, proposing targeted reforms to improve its effectiveness. Second, by analysing Moldova's accession challenges, it proposes solutions to facilitate the country's accession without overturning accession criteria.

How to renew membership for EU enlargement?

EU enlargement has happened several times in history , though we are currently facing a period of paralyzation since the last accession of Croatia in 2013.

Enlargement brings many benefits for joining States, including more political stability, freedom for citizens to live, study or work anywhere in the EU, increased trade with other Member States, increased funding and investment, and higher social, environmental, and

consumer standards. While the European community benefits from its enlargement as this would guarantee to the organization a stronger voice, that promotes rule of law, democracy and human rights, in the international context.

Today the process of accession requires new candidates with strict criteria, and it is divided into three main phases.

First a country that wishes to join the EU must submit a membership application to the council of the EU, that will rely on the EU Commission to check if the applicant fulfills the membership criteria. Based on the considerations of the Commission the Council will decide whether to begin negotiations for its accession to the Union, after the agreement of all EU Member States.

Then during membership negotiations, the candidate country prepares to implement EU law and standards.

The last step is the one of accession, where the Commission has the last word, if it recommends that the candidate is ready then an accession treaty is prepared. Before being signed and ratified by all EU Member States and the candidate country, the treaty must be approved also by the European Council and the European Parliament (European Union, nd).

The Treaty on the European Union states that any European country may apply for membership if it respects the democratic values of the EU and is committed to promoting them. These were mainly defined at the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993 and are hence referred to as *'Copenhagen criteria'*.

For a country that wishes to join the guarantee of stable institutions, human rights and respect for minorities, is mandatory, furthermore the candidate must have a functioning market economy (European Union, nd), and the ability to effectively implement the obligations of membership (adherence to the political and economic aims).

The EU is characterised by its diverse membership, shifting policies in times of crisis, extensive regulatory frameworks, and overlapping jurisdictions. This makes it particularly susceptible to collective action problems, in which the self-interest of individual actors can hinder the Union's broader goals. Enlargement is the solution to this challenge, letting the community gain more control over resources and policies.

For example, Russia's aggression in Ukraine has exposed vulnerabilities within the EU, undermining collective security. By integrating countries directly affected by these threats, the EU can foster a more cohesive approach to defence and deterrence (Anghel, 2024).

Enlargement in this sense became the instrument to extend security and maintain an efficient function in critical areas. Moreover the most important gain to the community, with new accession, would be its role in the world stage. The European Community is progressively getting overshadowed by superpowers that increase their influence and their economic power even more in the last few years. As Europe accesses new resources and control, it will secure internal market size, and its borders against external threats. A larger Europe carries more weight in international negotiations, allowing it to set more global standards, especially on core issues of the EU, such as climate change, human rights and digital governance.

In times of geopolitical fragmentation a wider Union acts as a stabilized "anchor", ensuring that Europe remains a formidable and coherent bloc capable of shaping the global order rather than merely reacting to it. Europe should aim at increasing its active role as an organization, the consequences of inaction are far greater, the EU autonomy would be at risk, and this probably will cede influence to external powers, and perpetuate instability at its borders.

Policy Recommendations

are ensured full membership is achieved. In the last stage, the country gain representation in the work of all EU institutions, agencies, and programmes, EU citizenship, passport, and protection for citizens, including standing for and voting in European elections (Mihajlović et al,. 2023).

To increase the demand of admission requests, funds could be given to the potential members, after observations and demonstrations of good behaviour and the adoption of adequate democratic index, in order to strengthen the commitment of entering into the Union. Incentives could be the solution for the lack of desire to become part of the community.

The Moldavian Case

Moldova has been largely overlooked in the EU enlargement agenda since its independence in 1991 (Parmentier, 2010, p.1). Following the disintegration of the USSR, the country formally pivoted towards a European path of institutional development and values, including fundamental human rights and a sustainable economy (Iatco, 2021, p.21), but this path was damaged by structural weaknesses during the transition period, notably

limited press freedom and a high degree of corruption within political elites (Paiu, 2020, p.144; Iatco, 2021, p.21).

Despite Moldova's participation in key EU frameworks, such as the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009, and the Association Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) in 2016 (Longhurst, 2024, p.6), these developments did not translate into candidate status. This reflects enduring structural constraints, including dependence on Russian raw materials and energy resources, as well as a persistent Soviet legacy reflected in

weak institutions and political culture (Paiu, 2020, p. 144). These factors contributed to prolonged governance by administrations closely linked to oligarchic networks up until the pro-European electoral shift of 2020 (Longhurst, 2024, p. 6–7).

This trajectory of weak institutional consolidation and oligarchic influence undermined Moldova's compliance with EU standards, culminating in major setbacks such as the 2014 financial crisis and the annulment of the 2018 Chișinău elections due to corruption, which prompted the EU and other international organisations to suspend financial assistance (Longhurst, 2024, p.6).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 transformed the nature of the Eastern Partnership and placed Moldova at the centre of EU strategic considerations, given its 1200km border with Ukraine and the presence of the Russian-influenced Transnistrian region (Cibotaru, 2023, p.144). In this context, the EU revived its enlargement policy to pursue geostrategic objectives (Fabbrini, 2024, p.12), leading to the official start of accession negotiations in December 2023 (European Commission, 2024). Within this framework, Moldova initially remained cautious in aligning with EU sanctions against the Russian Federation to safeguard its economy; however, following the granting of candidate status, it shifted its position, reflecting the expectation that candidate countries align with EU external actions (Vuico, 2024, p.130).

Despite the official start of negotiations, the path ahead for Moldova is rather challenging. A first challenge for EU accession is the lack of full territorial and political control over the Gagauz Autonomous Territorial Unit and the self-proclaimed Transnistrian Republic, both of which aim at reunifying with the Russian Federation (Paiu, 2020, p.143); this is compounded by dependence on Russian gas and raw-materials supply, which reinforces external influence (Cibotaru, 2023, p.144).

Secondly, Moldova struggles with high levels of corruption; despite improvements in the Corruption Perception Index as of 2023 (Transparency International, 2023), the country still faces significant difficulties in the effective implementation of anti-corruption laws, as well as weak protection for whistleblowers, which deters reporting (Longhurst, 2024, p.10). Moreover, civil society remains relatively weak and vulnerable to Russian disinformation in

the field of mass media due to limited domestic political influence and insufficient financial and technical resources (Tacu, 2024, p.216).

Another key challenge is de-oligarchisation, formalised by the May 2023 law targeting oligarchic opportunity structures, emphasising the removal of opportunity structures through legislative tools (Longhurst, 2024, p.12). While reducing oligarchic influence would improve public trust in institutions and support judicial independence, it remains politically sensitive, particularly given the continued presence of political actors linked to oligarchic networks in the Moldovan parliament (Longhurst, 2024, p.12).

Overall, while Moldova's accession requires a serious mobilisation of state institutions and political elites (Paiu, 2020, p.145), it is also constrained by the increasing politicisation of the enlargement process itself. The EU has acted as the main driver of Moldova's integration since the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 1998 (Morari, 2016, p.413); however, enlargement now takes place in a context of budgetary pressure and geopolitical competition, which affects the consistency of accession decisions (Fabbrini, 2024, p.18).

Moldova thus faces a diplomatic dilemma: aligning its accession timeline with Ukraine risks delaying its own progress, while pursuing a separate path may undermine perceptions of regional solidarity. This tension highlights the need for a more rule-based and depoliticised accession framework. In this respect, the following policy recommendations aim to address not only Moldova's internal challenges, but also the structural limitations of the EU accession process that risk undermining its effectiveness and credibility.

Policy Recommendations

Ensure that progress in accession negotiations cannot be formally delayed by external geopolitical developments, unless justified under clearly defined legal criteria. This would prevent Moldova's accession from being tied to factors beyond its control, such as future developments tied to the war in Ukraine.

Allow a proportion of accession-related funding to be allocated directly to local authorities and civil society organisations. This would reduce internal politicisation and strengthen democratic resilience.

Grant civil society organisations the ability to submit independent "shadow reports" to the Commission. This would improve the EU's accountability to the citizens of Moldova; in addition, it would strengthen the active role of Moldovan civil society, contributing to combating corruption and Russian propaganda in the country.

Conclusion

The enlargement is the best way to safeguard the future of the Union, particularly in moments of geopolitical crisis. It's important, though, to be aware of the challenges surrounding this phenomenon.

Critics, in fact, often highlight the economic gap of most states that want to enter the EU. Relative poverty of new members might trigger massive financial transfers and the potential growth of the Union.

Politically, some fear regarding the "Question of Democracy". From the perspective of the "old" EU members, enlargement could harm democracy by moving governance even farther from citizens' reach, eroding democratic practices that existed among and within the old members, and introducing new members that do not want to shift powers to the European level. Some countries and interest groups find themselves worse off in the short term, but in the long-term, the benefits of enlargement for Europe as a whole will clearly exceed the costs (Zielonka, 2004).

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