



Funded by the
European Union

GEO-POWER-EU

**Discerning the perceptual gap
between the EU policies and the
countries' expectations and needs**

GEO-POWER-EU: EMPOWERING THE GEOPOLITICAL EU IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

Number of the deliverable	Deliverable 2.1
Project Name	Empowering the Geopolitical EU in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans
Acronym	GEO-POWER-EU
Project No	101132692
Work Package	WP2
Lead Partner	UoP
Due date	31 July 2025
Dissemination level	Public
Author/Contributing Authors	Panagiota Manoli (UoP), Asterios Huliaras (UoP) <i>With the contributions of:</i> Alexandra Prodromidou, Faye Ververidou, Evaggelia Zisopoulou (SEERC); Valery Perry, Kurt Bassuener, Omar Memišević, Sharon Fisher (DPC); Zoran Nechev, Anamarija Velinovska (IDSCS); Ketevan Emukhvari (GFSIS); Mihail Nesteriuc, Mihai Turcanu, Carolina Ungureanu (IDIS); Marko Kovačević, Nemanja Džuverović, Tijana Rečević, Milan Varda (FPN); Barbara Matta (UNIPO); Tijana Rečević, Đorđe Krivokapić (FPN); Anthony Monckton (VE Insight); Asuman Kubra Bas, Samuel Doveri Vesterbye (ENC); Olga Brusylovska, Iryna Maksymenko, Sergii Glebov (ONU); Nikos Tzifakis (UoP)
Reviewed by	Valery Perry (DPC), Kurt Bassuener (DPC), Marcus How (VE Insight)
License	This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 Unported Licence .
DOI	https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16637101

This project has received funding from the European Union's H2020 Research and Innovation programme under grant agreement no 101132692 — GEO-POWER-EU — HORIZON-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the granting authority. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABOUT GEO-POWER-EU PROJECT.....	4
LIST OF PARTNER BENEFICIARIES INVOLVED.....	4
GLOSSARY, ACRONYMS, ABBREVIATIONS.....	5
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	7
INTRODUCTION	11
NOTE ON METHODOLOGY	12
1. THE OPACITY OF ENLARGEMENT	13
1.1 The enlargement discourse: Key perceptions	13
1.2 Blending merit with geopolitics: The dual basis of enlargement	15
2. GETTING CLOSER AND FARTHER APART	19
2.1 Moving on with candidacy but not with membership	19
2.2 Views on the credibility and predictability of enlargement.....	22
3. CHALLENGES OF ENLARGEMENT	29
3.1 Assessing the impact of accession on the CCs	29
3.2 Anticipated challenges ahead.....	35
4. TAKING UP THE VARIABLE GEOMETRY OF ACCESSION	37
4.1 Phased integration: Suitable for all?	38
4.2 Enlargement: There is no alternative	41
5. ENLARGEMENT UNDER GEOPOLITICAL STRAIN	43
5.1 Addressing geopolitical rivalry.....	43
5.2 The EU enlargement through the lens of the Russian war on Ukraine.....	51
CONCLUSIONS: THE TRILEMMA OF ENLARGEMENT: MERIT, GEOPOLITICS AND INTEGRATION	56
REFERENCES	59
LIST OF INTERVIEWS.....	59

ABOUT GEO-POWER-EU PROJECT

GEO-POWER-EU aims to empower the EU to manage security threats in its Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans amidst a deteriorating geopolitical environment. The project's primary ambition is to surpass current standards and develop a comprehensive EU strategy for these regions, utilizing new and reformed policy instruments while considering the strategic ambitions of other geopolitical actors.

To achieve this, GEO-POWER-EU's work plan is built on six specific objectives: proposing adaptations to the EU Enlargement policy to reflect new realities; examining the relevance of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and providing policy recommendations for its reform; assessing the influence of other geopolitical actors, including the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey, in these regions; offering strategic foresight on the prospects of geopolitical competition in these areas; exploring ways to enhance the EU's ability to contain military threats from beyond its borders; and proposing a comprehensive, multidimensional EU strategy to guide relations with Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries.

The project's research aims to advance beyond the current state of the art by developing a new conceptual and policy framework using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Methodologically, GEO-POWER-EU leverages cutting-edge expertise from various disciplines, implementing a multi-stage plan grounded in a participatory and inclusive approach. This approach involves systematic engagement of researchers from third institutions, decision-makers, stakeholders, and citizens—including those from the regions under analysis—throughout the project cycle.

More about the project: <https://geo-power.eu/>

LIST OF PARTNER BENEFICIARIES INVOLVED

- European Neighbourhood Council (ENC), Belgium
- University of the Peloponnese (UoP), Greece
- Kentro Erevnon Notioanatolikis Evropis Astiki Mi Kerdoskopiki Etaireia (SEERC), Greece
- Alma Mater Studiorum - Universita Di Bologna (UNIBO), Italy
- Wiener Institut Fur Internationale Wirtschaftsvergleiche (WIIW), Austria
- Sveuciliste U Rijeci (UNIRI), Croatia
- Institut Za Demokratija Societas Civilis Skopje (IDSCS), Republic of North Macedonia
- Univerzitet U Beogradu – Fakultet Političkih Nauka (FPN), Serbia
- Vienneast Consulting Gmbh (VE Insight), Austria
- Democratization Policy Council (DPC), Germany
- Institutul Pentru Dezvoltare Si Initiative Sociale Viitorul (IDIS VIITORUL), Republic of Moldova
- Odeskiy Nacionalniy Universitet Imeni I.I. Mechnikova (ONU), Ukraine
- Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS), Georgia
- Utrikespolitiska Institutet Informationsavd (UII), Sweden

GLOSSARY, ACRONYMS, ABBREVIATIONS

Glossary

Accession criteria	The accession criteria are the essential conditions a candidate country must satisfy to become an EU member state.
Credibility of the conditionality principle	The credibility of the conditionality principle in the EU's enlargement policy refers to how convincing, consistent, and effective the European Union is in applying and enforcing the accession conditions it sets for countries seeking to become EU members.
Negative conditionality	If a country does not move on the reform priorities agreed in the negotiations sufficiently or moves backwards, the EU may put on hold negotiations in certain areas, suspend the entire negotiation, reopen closed chapters, or reduce the EU funding and benefits of closer association.
Positive conditionality	If a country moves on the reform priorities agreed in the negotiations sufficiently, then the EU offers accelerated integration and “phasing-in” to individual EU policies, the EU market and EU programmes and increased funding and investment “through a performance-based and reform-oriented Instrument for Pre-accession support and closer cooperation with IFIs to leverage support”.
Sovereignist forces	It refers to political forces that advocate national sovereignty and resist integration into supranational bodies or other forms of external influence.
Stabilitocracy	A regime which provides stability externally but domestically oscillates between democracy and autocratic tendencies.
Strategic stagnation	The situation where the process of enlargement stalls due to a lack of clear strategic direction or a failure to adapt to changing circumstances.
Trilemma	The policy trilemma is a concept that refers to a situation in which a policy actor can't have all three of the preferred options or goals simultaneously. Essentially, policy makers can choose two out of the three preferred options.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

AA	Association Agreement
AL	Albania
BA	Bosnia and Herzegovina
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
CC	Candidate Country
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GE	Georgia
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
KO	Kosovo
MD	Moldova
MK	North Macedonia
MN	Montenegro
M/S	Member States
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SE	Serbia
UA	Ukraine
US	United States
WB	Western Balkans

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the views of elites on the Union's enlargement policy in EU candidates of the Western Balkan six (WB6) and Eastern Partnership (EaP), along with those drawn from the EU itself. Interviewees were drawn from politics, civil society, academia, and the business realm. Perceptions are mapped regarding the nature of enlargement policy, the balancing of merit-based principles with geopolitical considerations, the impact of the war in Ukraine, the challenges to the accession process, and the geopolitical context and implications of accession.

Interlocutors broadly agreed that enlargement remains essential; however, its efficacy in achieving substantive change was frequently questioned. The process is beset by impediments internal to the EU, within candidate countries, by third parties, and geopolitics writ large. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine galvanized member states to accelerate the enlargement process. But pre-existing tensions, such as advocacy for merit-based versus geopolitically motivated enlargement, as well as for and against phased (or gradual, staged) accession are reflected, as well as frustrations and resentments stemming from perceived EU inconsistency.

The prolonged accession process has fundamentally impacted how the EU's enlargement policy is perceived, and it has allowed new perceptual gaps to emerge between the two sides, i.e., elites in the EU and candidate countries. **The fundamental factor undermining the enlargement effort itself—whether as a geopolitical tool or as a transformative instrument based on merit—is the elites' conviction that EU membership is a perpetual goal.**

This summary attempts to distill the main findings. These include:

Systemic Observations

- There is a broad consensus that the enlargement process remains ad hoc and situational, without evident strategic consistency. Given the global power shifts and the threat to the European project posed by the full-scale war launched by Russia in Ukraine, hitherto unthinkable deviations from comfort zones are occurring on existential issues, such as territorial defence, in an EU framework. Creative, strategic thinking is required – but interlocutors see it lacking.

- Interviewees broadly agreed that enlargement decisions by the EU to date have included both merit-based (e.g. *acquis communautaire* adherence) and political/geopolitical priorities. Elites in the EU, however, frame the merit and value-based approach of enlargement in the context of the EU's institutional evolution and integration goals. EU voices tended to emphasize the merit basis for enlargement: that candidates adhere to the Copenhagen criteria and meet reform requirements, particularly regarding the rule of law and democratic standards. Western Balkan interlocutors questioned both the sincerity of such pronouncements, perceiving neither adherence to principles nor strategic geopolitical thinking. The result, they assert, is stagnation and loss of credibility across the board. The challenges of war in Ukraine, Moldova's fragile democracy, and democratic implosion in Georgia highlight the need for strategic clarity and credibility.

Specific Perceptions

What is Enlargement? While enlargement is broadly seen as a transformative phenomenon (for all involved), views differed in terms of emphases among respondents. Those from current EU members saw enlargement as a recurring process bound with the EU's own deepening and further integration – and therefore with the Union's institutional development, cohesion, and efficacy as an actor. Those from the Western Balkans tended to see enlargement as a modernization process linked directly with state-building and democratization. For those in the Eastern Partnership, enlargement is framed as a geopolitical imperative – and for them, an existential necessity. In short, for current members, the process is now (geo-)political, for the WB6 instrumental, and for the EaP existential – these different viewpoints generate friction with the standing *acquis* and standards-centric enlargement process.

Whither Conditionality? While the three elite groups all related their perception that conditionality's weight as an anchor in the enlargement process is diminishing, views differed as to why. Compliance with pre-accession requirements, including those under the umbrella of the Copenhagen criteria, has been seen as an indicator of the credibility of conditionality. Where this has been disappointing there the credibility of applying conditionality came into question among interviewees from the EU. EU elites also perceived the “**credibility issue**” as a “**capability and influence issue**” – that is, that the EU's leverage in the process had diminished. Elites in the

candidate countries perceive the weakening of conditionality as an EU “**policy preference and choice**”: the EU is seen as *not enforcing* adherence to agreed accession rules stringently and consistently, reflecting transactionalism and myopic geopolitics. In the Western Balkans, discussion regarding conditionality takes in several themes: a sense of politicized and shifting criteria and benchmarks, the perception of double standards, lack of clarity on timelines, and a sense that the EU lacks the will to demand compliance with its conditions. Eastern Partnership country respondents, relative newcomers to the enlargement queue, have more positive views regarding conditionality, but also fear uncertainty. Finally, mutual frustration regarding the pace of/lack of reforms driven by conditions became evident in the interviews. EU elites tended to blame candidate governments for not meeting standards and attendant goals; Western Balkan interviewees often question whether the conditions are applied impartially and fairly.

Perceived Challenges to Enlargement: EU elites stress two challenges: a) maintaining a reform momentum in the candidate (especially in the rule of law), and b) the institutional readiness of the EU to integrate new members. New members which are unprepared are seen as a threat to the Union’s further integration and institutional functionality. From the Western Balkans, declining faith in EU membership is seen as the main challenge. This malaise stems from a sense that the EU lacks commitment to enlargement, the erratic and unpredictable pace of the process, and the inability to address growing inequalities in the candidates. In EaP candidates, Russia’s invasion and the potential war outcomes are the main challenges perceived.

Phased Enlargement: Elites agree that phased integration is an acceptable short-term solution to the enlargement trilemma, addressing merit-based accession, geopolitical imperatives, and integration goals. However, it is not viewed as a permanent state, as candidate countries seek tangible progress towards full accession. EU actors worry about significant changes to decision-making procedures, potential abuses, and a type of “free riding” of sovereigntist forces in candidate countries. Interviewees in candidate countries fear that phased enlargement might lead to a permanent “halfway house” status with detrimental consequences on the pace of reforms. In the longer term, interviewees agreed that “alternatives to full EU membership should not be considered”.

Geopolitical Dimensions of Enlargement: While all EU and candidate country elite interviewees believed the EU possesses the power and tools to compete with geopolitical rivals throughout the enlargement area, there was widespread recognition it was not succeeding at present. The dynamics of geopolitical competition vary by country and sector, as to perceptions on why the EU has been ineffective. EU candidates see the primary reasons as being a lack of internal EU cohesion and unity, as well as the resulting lack of strategy, though country-specific rationales were offered. Within the EU, elites tended to attribute the inefficacy of the EU to a lack of strategic communication with candidate governments and societies and the roles of political elites in these countries.

The impact of Russia’s War on Ukraine: Elites in the EU and candidate countries all strongly shared the view that Russia’s full-scale war on Ukraine planted geopolitics and security at the heart of enlargement, reanimating the process, following a long period when enlargement was dominated by a bureaucratic and technical turn. This consensus also held that the enlargement discourse shifted from “compliance” and “transformation” to “resilience” and “security” as a result of Russia’s 2022 assault. While it served as a catalyst, both reorienting the scope of enlargement (with candidacy for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – now accelerated for the former two and stalled for the latter), this shock did not reset enlargement’s methodology.

INTRODUCTION

This report aims to map the views of political and civil society elites and stakeholders in the Western Balkans (WB) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) candidate countries on the EU's enlargement policy, with a focus on identifying points of perceptual convergence and divergence between the EU institutions, member states, and candidate countries.

Understanding elite perceptions of European policies, such as enlargement, is essential to grasp both the current state of the EU's integration capacity and its future trajectory. While EU accession cannot be viewed solely as a top-down, elite-driven process, elite perspectives remain crucial: they shape or directly influence policy decisions and act as key mediators of policy to broader publics. A range of empirical studies has examined how the EU is perceived globally (e.g. Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010; European Commission 2015). More recently, Uvalić (2023) has explored both perceptions and misperceptions of EU policy in the Western Balkans, applying Hill's (1993) "capability–expectation gap" framework to analyse the EU's external action.

Elites in both candidate and EU member states hold individual attitudes toward EU enlargement, shaped by a range of contextual and structural factors. As Chaban (2019) suggests, these influences can be grouped into three paradigmatic categories: endogenous factors that originate within a third country without EU involvement; exogenous factors driven by the EU without participation from the third country; and global factors shaped by broader international dynamics beyond the control of either the EU or the third country. Within this framework, perceptions of EU enlargement are shaped by multiple drivers, including economic considerations, national and historical ties, security concerns, prevailing local ideologies, and preferences regarding the future model of European integration (Ker-Lindsay et al. 2017).

The goal of this study is to identify commonalities and differences in how elites in the EU and applicant countries perceive the EU's enlargement policy towards the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions. The discussion is structured around the following guiding questions:

- How do elites understand the substance and priorities of the enlargement policy?
- After several years of the EU shaping the political, economic, and normative environment in candidate countries, how do elites in candidate countries perceive their state's level of alignment and integration with the Union?

- What are the prevailing perceptions of the challenges facing the enlargement policy, given its track record to date?
- How do elites view the prospect of staged or phased integration?
- How are the geopolitical dimensions of enlargement, including the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, understood by elites?

The study concludes with a reflection on the *current trilemma* facing EU enlargement: how to uphold the merit-based nature of the accession process, respond effectively to intensifying geopolitical pressures, and simultaneously reinforce the EU's own integration process.

NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Research for this study relied on elite interviews in all candidate countries in the Western Balkans, including potential candidate Kosovo, the three candidate countries in the Eastern European Neighborhood (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine), and interviews with elites in EU member states and institutions. Broadly defined as 'professional elite', the target group of interviews in this research was decision-makers and diplomats, and stakeholders such as experts, public intellectuals, representatives of professional associations, NGO representatives, and journalists.

In total, one hundred nine (109) semi-structured interviews were conducted either in person or via video conference between January and June 2025. Out of those, eighty-four (84) interviews were conducted with elites in the nine candidate countries, twenty-four (24) with elites in EU institutions and member states, and one (1) with a representative of a regional organization. Interviews held in the local language have been translated into English by the project researchers. The initial list of interviewees was compiled by the partner institutions of the Geo-Power-EU project and was regularly amended during this research. Ethical and confidentiality procedures were followed according to the project's Handbook and Data Management Plan.

The current paper is based on a qualitative analysis of the interview reports prepared by the partner institutions of the Geo-Power-EU project with the aim of providing insights into the reasoning behind elite perceptions and how elites frame the EU's enlargement policy. Quotes included in the text are often paraphrased or indirect to integrate the information better into the text. Any gap in knowledge has been filled through references to academic research and policy articles.

1. THE OPACITY OF ENLARGEMENT

1.1 THE ENLARGEMENT DISCOURSE: KEY PERCEPTIONS

Although enlargement is predominantly viewed as a **transformative framework** that defines **state-building, democratic legitimacy, and future prosperity**, some variations in understanding are marked among elites. Overall, interviews demonstrate the EU accession remains an anchor of reform, economic development, and political aspiration, but **i) its value basis is fuzzy, and ii) its double-headed approach -merit and (geo)political- is under growing contestation.**

Elite perceptions in the Western Balkans about the EU's enlargement reflect the experience of several years of accession negotiations and implementation of reforms. Interviewees consistently framed enlargement as a modernization project, a **transformation process** driving **state-building** (the latter mentioned mainly by elites in Albania and Kosovo) and reforms across all sectors of public policy, legislation, and society: "For Kosovo, as is for other Western Balkan countries, we use the European integration as a roadmap for all these reforms that we have to undertake in areas such as democracy and all the way down the areas such as intellectual property rights" (Ko.7, Interview with a civil society representative in Kosovo, 2025).

In EaP countries, accession is framed in geopolitical and security realities, and it is viewed as an **existential imperative**. For countries whose statehood is contested, such as Ukraine and Moldova, the EU accession trajectory is seen as the only available choice for sovereignty protection and state survival against external threats. Even though the EU is not perceived as a (hard) security provider, accession to the EU can halt Russia's coercive policies and destabilization efforts and ensure the economic survival of the EaP countries. Thus, according to a Ukrainian civil society representative, the country's EU accession is essential for "the state's survival" at times when the society's endurance is tested (UA.2, Interview with civil society representative in Ukraine, 2025). Interviewees in Moldova also stressed the economic and institutional resilience coming with accession (MD Interview Report 2025). The existential imperative is also relevant in the case of Kosovo, where interviewees highlighted that without the EU perspective, its statehood will be uncertain.

For the EU elites, the enlargement policy is path-dependent and shaped by previous experiences. They recognize that enlargement is not a one-time episode but a recurring and evolving process interlinked with the **deepening** of the EU's integration, and thus, the EU's **cohesion**, **actorness**, and **institutional** evolution. EU elites also tend to frame enlargement as being primarily about promoting and upholding **EU values**. Thus, they perceive that enlargement is clearly about transforming institutions, still “not only adopting laws but also about internalizing European values” (EU.6, Interview with official from the European Commission, 2025).

The emphasis on European values is of utmost importance for EU elites. However, in candidate countries, while it is not a recurrent aspect cited by political elites, civil society and independent elites do not see that the EU is putting values front and center. When discussing this with elites in candidate countries, enlargement is barely conferred in common identity and values. Any references to the “return to the family, the European family” (AL.4, Interview with civil society representative in Albania, 2025) and to the sharing of the same values “We share EU's values, they [the EU] are not in a position where they have to fight to keep us on the EU path” (Ko.2, Interview with a policy maker in Kosovo, 2025) come only as a second layer of arguments framing EU accession discourses. During interviews in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, our interlocutors noted incredulity that the EU prioritizes values. They cited, for example, the way Serbia is treated as a frontrunner despite its increasingly autocratic government. It is equally questioned by some elites in the candidate countries (CCs) whether values filter people's attitudes towards the EU. An NGO representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina argued, “I think that people professing EU values don't know what these values even are” (BA.2, Interview with NGO representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025). As a Georgian civil society representative mentioned: “Do they [people] support it [the EU] because it is a welfare state, etc.? Well, that too, but how many of them support it because of European values? I'm not convinced ...” (GE.1, Interview with civil society representative in Georgia, 2025). Equally, an elite from the business community in Albania said “the assessment of the Albanian society about the EU is much more concentrated on the economic benefits of EU [accession], rather than the set of values” the latter implies (AL.3, Interview with a business sector representative in Albania, 2025).

An ever more intricate process. The current enlargement process is seen as more demanding compared to the past rounds, with stricter and more detailed standards, and “highly technical” involving detailed analysis of legal frameworks (EU.12, Interview with an EU diplomat, 2025).

This is viewed by EU elites as a logical evolution given that “club rules” change over time based on lessons learned from previous enlargements (EU.23, Interview with private sector representative in EU M/S, 2025). As an interviewee argued, “Yes, we demand more, but with good reason, because the EU is also an organization that's developing. The EU of 20 years ago was not the EU of today” (EU.7, Interview with policy maker in EU M/S, 2025). On the contrary, several elites in the Western Balkans (WB) perceive the complex technicalities and strict criteria as politically driven and unfair. “You have a situation where many countries have become members of the European Union without any special criteria, particularly not merit-based ones” (SE.8, Interview with Serbian diplomat, 2025).

1.2 BLENDING MERIT WITH GEOPOLITICS: THE DUAL BASIS OF ENLARGEMENT

The interviews conducted indicate that there are bridging perceptions and connecting arguments among elites in candidate countries and the EU side about the merit and geopolitical basis of enlargement. As geopolitical imperatives are increasingly mixed with merit-based conditions, the EU’s enlargement policy has grown more ambiguous in both purpose and messaging.

15

Merit and (geo)politics: The two sides of enlargement policy. Prevailing pragmatism is evident among all elites who acknowledge that there need not be an inherent contradiction between merit and geopolitics by definition, as the history of the EU’s enlargement to date shows. Views of interviewees on the ‘merit versus geopolitics’ question can be grouped into two main strands.

According to most EU political elites, the enlargement process may be jump-started and then driven by (geo)political considerations. However, the ultimate decision is based on compliance with accession criteria. No member state would support an enlargement that could compromise the EU’s functioning. Indeed, EU interviewees expressed the view that the integrity and credibility of the accession process would be put at risk were the established, merit-based framework to be abandoned. They repeatedly stressed that accession is primarily enabled by a candidate's internal reforms, adherence to the Copenhagen criteria, and alignment with the EU acquis. Although the geopolitical drivers of enlargement are not dismissed by EU elites, they stress that the process is principally grounded in the EU’s Treaties and driven by the Union’s core values and interests

(EU.2, Interview with political advisor in the European Parliament, 2025). As stated by an EU diplomat, “When accession moves on and the clusters are about to close, then there will be no EU member state that will overlook the criteria and compromise the enlargement process” (EU.11, Interview with diplomat at EU M/S, 2025). Thus, most interviewees among EU elites agree that accession is fundamentally a merit-based process, requiring candidate countries to fulfill stringent criteria. That said, there is a strong acknowledgement that geopolitical factors have increasingly influenced the pace and prioritisation of enlargement (EU.12, Interview with EU diplomat, 2025), even as some interviewees warned against overemphasis as it could undermine the merit-based fundamentals.

The perceptions of elites in candidate countries are more explicit about the geopolitical aspect of enlargement, despite their advocacy for a merit-based approach. Several interlocutors –both Eurosceptics and pro-European voices– contradicted the dominant view among EU elites, arguing that the entire process is presented as hinging on normative and technical criteria, but is ultimately (geo)political. Numerous elites in the Western Balkans argued that the EU is still a merit-based and technical process, and it should remain as such. As one interviewee in Albania put it: “we acknowledge that this is a merit-based process. It is up to us to do the homework and make sure that we comply with the standards” (AL.1, Interview with policy maker in Albania, 2025) while another one pointed out that their preference is for maintaining merit-based criteria (“I am in favor of a merit-based process”, AL.2, Interview with civil society representative in Albania, 2025). Yet, they also recognized that “no EU enlargement has ever been technical. Every single EU enlargement has been deeply political” (AL.4, Interview with civil society representative in Albania, 2025). Bulgaria and Romania were often noted as an illustrative case that accession is a political matter rather than a technical process dependent on transformational reforms. Likewise, in Serbia, the enlargement policy is regarded as ultimately driven by political and geopolitical considerations rather than merit-based criteria. The same is true in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where interviewees did not generally regard EU enlargement policy as merit-based. Even among the few interviewees who believe that enlargement has followed a merit-based approach – mainly politicians – there is agreement that geopolitics has increasingly shaped the process, particularly in light of the perceived threat of malign influence from actors such as Russia and China.

The issue of “merit versus geopolitics” is not a priority among elites in the EaP, who have only recently started the accession process. Most elites in **EaP candidates** (as in Moldova) stress that “both dimensions are essential, and the EU has adopted a more pragmatic and flexible methodology” (MD Interview Report 2025). “We must consider that there is a geopolitical necessity for Ukraine’s integration, both for the EU, first and foremost, and for Ukraine itself. And in this case, should we place significant emphasis on the achievements Ukraine has not yet made on its path to integration? I think no”, said an interviewee in Ukraine (UA.8, Interview with journalist in Ukraine, 2025). Respondents in the EaP candidate countries also note that the population has welcomed the hybrid pragmatic and geopolitical posture of the EU. Their positive attitude towards a geopolitical enlargement comes as they have been disenchanted with the technocratic approach that has led “to nowhere in the past”. Similar voices were also raised by some elites in the Western Balkans: “EU enlargement was not geopolitical. It has to be geopolitical. It has been driven by the acquis. But other actors’ policies, such as Russia, China and Turkey, are driven by geopolitics” (Al.4, Interview with civil society representative in Albania, 2025).

Table 1. Elite Perceptions on Merit versus Geopolitics

Perception	Key statement
A balancing act	“The EU enlargement policy is indeed a blend of both technical and political elements” (EU.12, Interview with EU diplomat, 2025)
Merit- based approach	<p>“When accession moves on and the clusters are about to close, then there will be no EU member state that will overlook the criteria and compromise the enlargement process” (EU10., Interview with member of parliament in EU M/S, 2025)</p> <p>“We acknowledge that this is a merit-based process. It is up to us to do the homework and make sure that we comply with the standards” (AL.1, Interview with policy maker in Albania, 2025)</p>
A Geopolitical approach	“Every single membership wave, in a way, was geopolitical because the project itself started from something that was geopolitical” (Ko.5, Interview with a civil society representative in Kosovo, 2025)
The evolving nature of enlargement	“It was merit-based until the Juncker Commission came in around 2015. Between then and 2019, there was a stagnation period. The idea of ‘merit-based’ enlargement was more a political phrase than reality... The new Commission recognised the geopolitical importance of enlargement – especially after Russia’s aggression

	against Ukraine” (MN.4, Interview with diplomat of Montenegro, 12 March 2025)
--	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Balancing Act: The challenge for all elites lies in maintaining the balance between merit and geopolitics. EU elites cautioned against over-emphasizing geopolitics, as it can be counterproductive, potentially leading to the admission of countries not yet fully ready for membership (EU.2, Interview with political advisor in the European Parliament, 2025). Conversely, it was also stressed that ignoring geopolitical realities in the neighbourhood risks allowing other actors to strengthen their presence (EU.11, Interview with diplomat at EU M/S, 2025). Although elites in the candidate states had differing views on the primacy of geopolitics and merit, most believed that this need not be a binary choice. Their foremost concern was simply that there was fairness in the process. As one interviewee put it, “So, all, I think previous waves of enlargement of accession had definitely been led by a geopolitical logic, but I think you need to have the criteria fulfilled so that we can have a geopolitical discussion...The geopolitical logic has now become more pressing, and I think for all leaders in Europe, they now pursue foreign policy through a more geopolitical lens than, let's say, in the 1990s or even 10 years ago, where you had a stronger emphasis on the normative aspects of EU accession. Yes, I think the leadership across Europe uses a stronger geopolitical language now and a similar logic drives their actions and policies, but I don't think it's either-or” (AL5, Interview with academic in EU M/S, 2025).

There are two factors often voiced by elites from both sides that have shaped different perceptions on the merit or geopolitical nature of enlargement, although both sides agree that merit and geopolitics are interlinked by realities. **First, it's the accumulated experience of previous enlargement rounds** which has, on the one hand, strengthened the EU elites' belief on the merit basis of the enlargement and the need to safeguard accession criteria as they are linked to the evolution of the EU, while, on the other hand, it has underscored the belief of elites in the aspiring members that enlargement has been a geopolitically driven process which has taken place mostly in the absence of the current stringent criteria. **Second, it is the experience of the implementation of the current enlargement methodology and the evolution of conditionality**, which, for the EU elites, indicates the political commitment of the EU/member states to safeguard the merit of the process for the sake of internal cohesion of the Union. On the contrary, elites in aspiring

members view the evolution of the conditionality principle and its application in the current enlargement processes as a manifestation of (geo)politics.

2. GETTING CLOSER AND FARTHER APART

What conditions the pace of accession progress? Interviewees underscored three types of factors that spur uncertainty about the pace and success of the process: (a) domestic challenges in candidate countries, (b) the EU's internal dynamics and (c) the geopolitical shifts that often derail the process or shift it away from the established accession criteria and the enlargement methodology. Taking those factors into account, a common thread through all interviews is that despite the revival of enlargement since 2022, there is uncertainty about the pace of the accession process and its conclusion with the granting of full EU membership. Uncertainty has led to a lack of enthusiasm. The process is no longer driven by the optimism of earlier waves (AT.2, Interview with policy maker in EU M/S, 2025). Interviews reveal a pool of support for EU membership, but also strong caution and ambiguity about the direction of the process. Several respondents also reflected on earlier moments in EU history, such as the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, as periods when the process was more credible and predictable. By contrast, the current state of affairs was described as unpredictable, where “the real cost is the opportunity cost of waiting—of being in the process without actually moving forward” (MK.7, Interview with NGO representative in North Macedonia, 2025).

19

2.1 MOVING ON WITH CANDIDACY BUT NOT WITH MEMBERSHIP

Elites in the candidate countries generally view the pace of EU enlargement with more frustration in the Western Balkans and Georgia and more positivity in Moldova and Ukraine. What comes as a diverse approach to accession is that **while elites in candidate countries focus on how the accession process ends, EU elites prefer to concentrate on the process itself and on how to keep it moving**. The following issues were highlighted in the interviews:

Accession looks like a moving goalpost. Several interviewees in the Western Balkans complained that the EU continually introduces new conditions for accession that defer membership. This perception is exemplified by the case of Serbia, where the conditions for accession have

continually shifted – from initial cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), to relations with Montenegro, then to the Kosovo issue, and more recently, to alignment with EU foreign policy. As one pro-European journalist (SE.6 Interview with journalist in Serbia, 2025) put it: “... if we look back from the year 2000 when the country first started in that direction, there have been various phases, because of which Serbia wasted plenty of time. At the beginning, it was cooperation with the Hague [i.e., ICTY], problems with the state union of Serbia and Montenegro, and later the issue of Kosovo; i.e., a range of conditions which were always advanced in parallel with demands for democratic reforms”.

Stagnation rather than genuine progress. Despite the recent revitalization of the enlargement process, elites in Western Balkans, as in the case of North Macedonia, share a perception framed as **stagnation** (being trapped in a limbo where the process continues formally at a technical level but without genuine progress and clarity): “We are stuck,” said one respondent, “not because of what we did or didn’t do, but because the system is broken on both sides” (MK.9, Interview with academic in North Macedonia, 2025). A Serbian diplomat put it: “Let’s say, it’s a period of ...maybe ten to even fifteen years, where we were simply in some kind of status quo of neither there nor here. Simply, no progress was seen, no, as I would say, no certainty of accession” (SE.8, Interview with Serbian diplomat, 2025). Elites in the EaP candidate countries, in particular in Ukraine and Moldova, are more positive about the European path of their countries. Still, concerns were raised by interviewees in Georgia: “... if we compare, let’s say, the last 5 years, or the period 2010-2015, then there is still, of course, some progress. But if we look at the last three years, I am afraid we just see the backsliding in that regard” (GE.1, Interview with civil society representative in Georgia, 2025). As an expert in Serbia explained (SE.2, Interview with expert in Serbia, 2025): “the process of European integration has lost its transformative power (...). So, the closer a candidate country is to the Union, it no longer means that it is a better-functioning democratic society based on the principles on which the European Union itself is founded”.

Interviewees on the EU side, do not share the perception of “stagnation” despite recognising the slow pace of enlargement. On the contrary, the dominant perception is that of a steady partial integration without formal membership. This involves integrating the Western Balkan countries into the EU's single market, enhancing regional cooperation, and promoting reforms in governance and the rule of law. The Growth Plan and the Association Agreements, including the DCFTAs for the EaP candidates are most often mentioned as proof of the advancement of practical political and

integration of the willing aspiring members (EU.8, Interview with policy maker in an EU M/S, 2025).

Is the “Associated Trio” of the EaP moving faster towards the EU? Cautious optimism is a prevailing approach of interviewees in Moldova and Ukraine. Despite the technical progress achieved in fulfilling the conditions to be awarded candidate status in December 2023 and the partial integration through the Association Agreements, including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas, elites in both countries acknowledge that “flexibility and inventive approaches” (MD.10, Interview with EEAS representative, 2025) are needed for the membership to actually realize given the specific security conditions in both countries. On the contrary, interviewees in Georgia expressed disappointment for the halted EU accession process triggered by the Georgian government's decision to suspend negotiations until 2028. “We are having candidate country status, and at the end, our relations with the EU are not even zero, they are below zero” said a former diplomat (GE.9, Interview with former diplomat in Georgia, 2025). The same frustration was expressed by a business man: “...I think it is a terrible thing for Georgia to lose this opportunity because we paid the invoice for it already and now that it's time to collect the dividends, we are kicking the bucket” (GE.7, Interview with business person in Georgia, 2025).

21

The longer the candidacy, the greater the fatigue. Interviewees noted that the longer the accession process drags on, the greater the fatigue becomes with the ambiguity, inertia, and perceived inconsistencies in the EU's enlargement policy. The prolonged candidacy periods have thus contributed to public disaffection and Euroscepticism. As a Eurosceptic politician in Serbia put it (SE.4, Interview with politician and expert in Serbia, 2025), “Well, you see, on one hand, the citizens are tired...I think it makes sense, they're tired of promises of a better life linked to EU accession.” Pro-EU political elites also share the same frustration with the slow pace of enlargement: “The stagnation of Western Balkan countries, despite their prolonged candidacy, has created an enlargement fatigue. The ongoing pause in the accession process, with no real progress for any Balkan country, has drained enthusiasm and made people doubt whether EU membership is achievable. That is why I strongly oppose tying the fate of all Western Balkan countries together in a single package” (SE.5, Interview with opposition leader in Serbia, 2025). As put by a former government official in Montenegro, the length of the process “has led to fatigue from promises,

from those commitments we keep making and then weakly fulfilling, and that's where our institutions falter" (MN.5, Interview with former official in Montenegro, 2025).

2.2 VIEWS ON THE CREDIBILITY AND PREDICTABILITY OF ENLARGEMENT

The weakening of credibility of the enlargement process – closely tied to the application of the conditionality instrument – is the most pressing issue raised in the interviews. There is a shared understanding among all elites that the credibility of the enlargement process has been gradually undermined by a series of aggravating factors. Interviews suggest that actors tend to adopt a **“cherry-picking” approach** when attributing the loss of credibility in the enlargement process to one or another factor. However, all interlocutors agree that the real issue lies in the difficulty of aligning especially the first four factors, simultaneously resulting in a **variable and inconsistent pace** of accession, widely seen as the main source of diminished credibility. As one interviewee from an EU member state observed, accession moves “very fast sometimes, while other times it stops for years” (EU.11, Interview with diplomat in EU M/S, 2025), with the pace of accession being disconnected from progress on fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria.

The **credibility of EU enlargement is conditioned on the efficient decision-making by the EU institutions**. The application of the unanimity rule at various stages has often delayed accession progress, leading to distrust in the process. This view is equally shared by EU elites and elites in the candidate countries. As a candidate country “has to secure a hundred ‘yes’, the chances of obstructing the accession process mount”, said an EU policy elite (EU.22, Interview with diplomat in EU M/S, 2025). As put by another interviewee, “we need to have a qualified majority for accession matters (...) otherwise it's impossible” to advance the process (EU.2, Interview with political advisor in European Parliament, 2025).

Credibility is increasingly undermined by its politicization, often through bilateral disputes which are reframed not as national interests, but as European concerns (such as good neighbourly relations or the functioning of the Single Market). The member states' control of the process is effectively unrestricted. Thus, this enables an excessively wide range of bilateral issues to be prioritised, and the hyper-politicization of the process, which has led to a loss of credibility of the EU enlargement policy (EU.7, Interview with policy maker in EU M/S, 2025). North Macedonia stands out as a paradigmatic case. As an interviewee put it, “the primary challenges to North

Macedonia's EU accession lie at the intersection of domestic reform deficits and structural inconsistencies within the EU's enlargement framework. The politicization of the process through bilateral disputes has severely damaged the credibility of the accession path" (MK.8, Interview with diplomat in North Macedonia, 2025). Although "hyper-politization" is primarily raised as a concern by elites in WB6, there are similar rising concerns in the case of Ukraine's accession. As an NGO interviewee from that country put it, "There are countries that are clearly working against Ukraine's accession" (UA.6, Interview with civil society representative, 2025). The EU elites acknowledge the problem, linking it to institutional decision-making, but they do not consider it the prime reason for the weakening credibility of enlargement, prioritizing instead another explanatory factor: the lack of commitment from local political elites.

Credibility depends on "the pace and depth of reforms within each candidate country" that drive or stall accession (EU.22, Interview with diplomat in EU M/S, 2025). EU policy-making elites mostly hold political forces in the CCs accountable for the accession inertia, which is perceived in country-specific contexts. According to that perspective, a country's reform capacity is shaped by domestic factors such as political dynamics, the potential for consensus, political will, and economic size, as well as by country-specific circumstances, including, for example, wartime conditions in Ukraine's case. As an interviewee argued, "genuine shortcomings in implementing reforms remain the largest barrier and explain why accession timelines have stretched" (MN.8, Interview with an analyst in Montenegro, 2025). Another interviewee on the EU side also stressed that "enlargement has stalled due to problems with the rule of law in several candidate countries and the fragility of their political system" (EU.10, Interview with member of National Parliament in Greece, 2025). Civil society elites in the CCs often also share the same concern: "when we talk about predictability, we are talking about certain political elites or specific political actors with which the European Union could maintain a certain dialogue. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, it is complicated", said an interviewee in Moldova (MD.7, Interview with analyst in Moldova, 2025). Arguably, the unfolding "blame game" between the EU and candidate countries regarding reforms further erodes trust.

Credibility is linked to the cost of reforms borne by the candidate countries. However, this factor is not prioritized by the EU elites which is generally seen as more manageable, given that the EU has developed a range of financial instruments to support reform efforts, such as the Instrument

for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and, more recently, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (EU.22, Interview with diplomat in EU M/S, 2025). On the contrary, interviewees in WB, coming mostly from the civil society, placed importance on two related shortcomings that dilute the long-term benefits for the people in the aspiring countries and make the process less appealing: on the one hand, the fact that EU pre-accession assistance reaches the elites “empowering the people in power” (BA.13, Interview with journalist in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025) and not the societies, and, on the other hand, the heavy, unevenly distributed, socio-economic cost of reforms borne by some segments of the society. Those concerns were primarily raised by civil society elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

According to elites in the Western Balkans, **the circumvention of conditionality by the EU in cases of erosion of the rule of law and non-alignment with the EU’s foreign policy is becoming the rule rather than the exception, with detrimental effects on the EU’s credibility.** A recurring view is that the EU is backsliding in its application of the conditionality principle with a serious long-term negative impact, whether it is due to geopolitical or transactional considerations.

The case of the EU’s policies towards Serbia is the most frequently cited one by nearly all elites in WB, not only as a case of hypocrisy but also due to its detrimental counter-effects for democratic progress in the country. “What has sent Serbia backwards in democracy is the EU. I say this in full confidence [...] Ten years ago, Serbia had a higher support for EU membership, a much more democratic environment, and much more pluralism than they have today. How is it possible? It’s because of the EU’s approach towards the leadership in Serbia. What Serbia’s leadership understood is that in order to say no to the EU and be able to say no, you have to have close and very special links with the powers that are opposite to the EU”, mentioned a policy maker [Ko.2, Interview with a policy maker in Kosovo, 2025]. Interviewees particularly emphasized the lithium case in Serbia, which has exposed the EU’s double standards and geopolitical priorities. While the European Parliament and some EU governments were critical of the Belgrade regime over fraudulent elections in December 2023, they overlooked these concerns in the summer of 2024 when Belgrade offered its lithium deposits to support of the European automobile industry. As a former diplomat (SE.7, Interview with former diplomat and opposition figure in Serbia, 2025) explained: “They simply want to expand their resource market

and their independence in a way, making sure these resources are not under Chinese or Russian control. And you can see that the war in Ukraine is, at least in part, also a war over resources”.

Resentment is expressed towards what is viewed as the EU’s “cynicism” when, rather than rewarding the adoption of the EU *acquis*, it rewards geopolitical maneuvering. Here, too, Serbia’s “four-chair” policy (EU, US, China, and Russia) is viewed by all WB elites as paying off for Serbia as “it juggles these interests, yet degrading its commitment to the reforms needed for an EU future” (AL.4, Interview with civil society representative in Albania, 2025). Speaking of the EU’s position regarding Serbia, a journalist in Albania put it as follows: “They [i.e. the EU] want to keep them closer because they’re scared Serbians are going to go off to Russia, but then they’re losing credibility because of it... Meanwhile, Vucic smiles in a press conference in Brussels, and then he goes back and on TV the same night and he says he doesn’t care about joining the EU. I mean, it makes the EU look ridiculous locally” (AL.6, Interview with journalist in Albania, 2025).

The wider sense is that the geopolitisation of enlargement has exacerbated double standards and inconsistencies. Several elites (especially in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina) believed that it had led to the regrettable tolerance by the EU of “stabilitocracies” in the Western Balkans; namely, governments that are accommodated for geopolitical reasons (e.g., maintaining order in their countries), even as they backslide or otherwise lag in the implementation of EU norms and standards (as noticed also in Bieber 2018). Furthermore, interviewees in countries closer to accession (e.g., Montenegro, Albania) expressed the view that the enlargement process had not only become more geopolitical, but in reality, “it has become more hypocritical” (MN.6, Interview with Former High-Level Official for EU Integration in Montenegro, 2025). This is interesting as the countries that seem to have been tapped for past progress recognize that their own countries have not, in fact, changed so much to merit the progress.

The EU’s speedy offer of candidacy status to EaP countries has added to the feeling of elites in WB that they have not been treated fairly. Though acknowledging the titanic task of reforms in Moldova and Ukraine, elites in the Western Balkans feel they have been treated unfairly by the EU. As a civil society elite in Montenegro put it, “It’s been unfair to North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Albania for many years. They met the criteria for certain stages but didn’t get the ‘carrot’.

For Montenegro, it's been the opposite—progress despite not meeting the criteria. The process is not equally biased toward everyone. For some, it remains stricter and more objective. That again depends on geopolitical decisions and the needs of individual member states” (MN.8, Interview with an analyst in Montenegro, 2025). Strengthening the “double standards” perception, it is thus believed that the recent sidelining of merit seems to apply only to EaP candidates but not to the Western Balkans. That fuels resentment and disengagement, and the sense that geopolitical considerations benefit the EaP, but perhaps not the WB6.

From another perspective, **the credibility of the EU is diluted due to inconsistencies between what Brussels demands and what some EU members themselves practice or demand from them.** The EU's failure to address democratic backsliding in its member states, such as Hungary, raises legitimate concerns about whether the EU acquis is consistently and deeply embedded across the Union (MN.1, Interview with policy maker, 2025).

Overall, the prolonged and inconsistent nature of the accession process has contributed to rising frustration and cynicism in WB6, with elites perceiving that progress is perpetually postponed. According to a policy maker in Kosovo, “...for us, it's a bit frustrating, because we are not able to start the process. But technically, in some areas, we are doing much better than some candidate countries in the region [...] we should have long ago got candidate status, we should have long ago got visa liberalization, we should have also started negotiations” [Ko.1, Interview with a policy maker in Kosovo, 16 January 2025]. The perpetual postponement of accession is, by some WB elites (in countries closer to accession), attributed to the absence of the EU's actual commitment and readiness to enlarge. The EU's readiness to proceed with the accession of frontrunner candidates is regarded as highly doubtful. As a representative of the Central Bank of Montenegro put it: “The EU is not ready to integrate more countries... the EU simply isn't ready” (MN.3, Interview with banker in Montenegro, 2025). Contrary to that perception, most interviewed EU elites felt that any delays in the pace of accession reflect a genuine concern that aspiring members will join the EU on the basis of merit, and as full members with full rights and obligations and without prolonged transitional periods being offered (EU.22, Interview with diplomat in EU M/S, 2025).

EU elites frame the credibility issue as one of “capability and influence” – that is, the EU's diminishing leverage over the process and its inability to project its norms as before. This is

attributed to internal divisions within the EU, the lack of a clear, unified message from the West as a whole (e.g., the EU versus the US on rule of law reforms), or to the increased leverage of other actors in the region. “The countries in the region hear different voices and receive different messages. For example, today the US does not push for reforms in the rule of law the way the EU does”, said an interviewee from the EU (EU.10, Interview with member of the National Parliament of Greece, 2025). Interviewees in the Western Balkans and the EaP countries also air, to some degree, that perception and point to the new political economy of the region, arguing that the credibility of the EU’s imposed conditionality is undermined directly or indirectly by the alternative policy options offered by other actors. Thus, while EU membership remains the only viable option on the table, there are other, multiple pathways to pursue short-term development and growth goals that come without the burden of conditionality. As a journalist in Bosnia and Herzegovina argued, pressure based on EU leverage would have been needed around 10 years ago, but now, the local elites have learned that money can come into the country from many different sources. EU Communications are too mild and diplomatic (BA.6, Interview with journalist in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025).

A clear perceptual gap emerges around the issue of predictability. Despite the introduction of a revised methodology, quantitative indicators, and new benchmarks, these measures have not improved predictability in the eyes of many. Western Balkan elites, in particular, view predictability as having been further undermined by the fast-tracked granting of a European perspective to the so-called associated trio – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia – following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. On the contrary, EaP elites, do not share that concern. **Although elites in candidate countries stress that predictability is a precondition for restoring the credibility of the whole enlargement process, EU elites do not share that view.** On the contrary, there is a shared perception among EU elites that a more predictable timetable for accession is unrealistic and undesirable, as it could undermine the merit-based approach by allowing countries to join without implementing the full spectrum of reforms (EU.5, Interview with EU Officer, 2025). They see no urgency in addressing predictability and stress that predictability is found in the EU’s commitment to enlargement itself. The principle is that if a partner fulfills its obligations, it will join “at some point”.

The picture of the credibility and predictability of the enlargement process is not entirely bleak. The accelerated pace of negotiations with Montenegro and Albania, along with the swift adoption of the Growth Plan, have often been cited as signs of renewed EU commitment in the Western Balkans. A more optimistic outlook also emerged in interviews with elites in the EaP candidate countries. “I think EU enlargement as such is one of the success stories of the EU... I say enlargement is still one of the examples of how the EU could give the perspective of more Europe...” (GE.9, Interview with former diplomat in Georgia, 2025).

Table 2: Perceptions on the factors contributing to the credibility problem of enlargement policy

Perceptions	Key statement
Hyper-politization that puts off enlargement	“The politicization of the process through bilateral disputes has severely damaged the credibility of the accession path”. (MK.8, Interview with diplomat from North Macedonia, 2025)
Applying double standards	“Ukraine and Moldova got status in weeks—what about us?” (MN.8, Interview with an analyst in Montenegro, 2025)
The candidates’ slow reform pace	“From this perspective, the European Commission is predictable... we have set our target, and the EU checks whether we respect it. However, what is unpredictable is the final decision on membership. The EU does not say: ‘You will become a member this year.’ Instead, we start finding all kinds of excuses and delays if reforms are not completed on time. That is not the EU’s fault - it is our responsibility.” (MD.1, Interview with policy maker in Moldova, 2025)
Lack of the EU’s readiness to enlarge	“The EU is not ready to integrate more countries. The idea of integrating Montenegro just to prove that the enlargement process is alive is futile—the EU simply isn’t ready” (MN.3, Interview with banker in Montenegro, 2025)
Assessing progress on criteria other than reforms	“It’s been 11 years, or even more, 12 years, that regardless of what our governments did in reforms, EU reforms, they were praised or sanctioned depending on whether they deliver on the [Kosovo-Serbia] dialogue, not on the EU reforms” (Ko.4, Interview with civil society representative in Kosovo, 2025)
Lack of EU’s commitment to conditionality	“I see that granting candidacy to Bosnia and Herzegovina was based on reduced requirements ... So they [government] behave as bad students- catch up at the end... The citizens get, too. That’s their critique of the EU- that they don’t uphold their own standards” (BA.4,

	Interview with NGO representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025)
A transactional approach	“... we will continue with this transactional policy, which didn't start in 2022 but actually dates back to 2014, or rather, to the Pristina-Belgrade Agreement. Because in 2014, Serbia was granted EU accession negotiations due to that first agreement, and then, as I said, it gained additional points primarily due to its migration policy, each time because of something more significant in terms of German or other countries' interests rather than its own internal situation” (SE.7, Interview with former diplomat in Serbia)

3. CHALLENGES OF ENLARGEMENT

The overall view on EU enlargement held by **elites in the candidate countries** is predominantly positive, with clear benefits in most areas but persistent challenges in others. While accession is viewed as having brought economic benefits like increased trade, investment, and economic convergence with the EU, it also presents challenges related to reform implementation, political stability, and the rule of law, most of which depend on political will.

29

3.1 ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF ACCESSION ON THE CCs

Interviewees (both from the political and the wider civil society fields) in the candidate countries agree that the enlargement process has had a positive effect in several key areas, notably economic development, human rights, democracy, and the fight against corruption (despite the persisting problem). “Well, I honestly don't see any negative impacts from the process itself on Montenegro—politically, economically, or in terms of security”, said an interviewee in Montenegro (MN.4, Interview with Diplomat in MNE Mission to the EU, 2025). Reform benefits were frequently cited in areas such as judiciary reform, environmental policy, public procurement, and trade facilitation, or even in food safety and customs (areas where tangible, everyday impact could be seen according to an interviewee in North Macedonia (MK.2, Interview with policy maker in North Macedonia, 2025).

In Albania, all elites (political or civil society) prioritized the positive impact on the rule of law. “First, [positive impact] is the radical transformation of democratic standards of the rule of law, and that is why it's important that the negotiations started with cluster one, which is the fundamentals. That means that economic development can go hand in hand with a robust rule of law and democratic society”, said an interviewee from the business sector (AL.3, Interview with a business sector representative in Albania, 2025). Others also point to progress in more specific domains, such as digitalisation and cyber security (MN.6, Interview with former high-level official for EU integration, 2025). Similar positive views are expressed by elites in other WB countries. In particular, economic reforms are regarded as more enduring than those in the fields of the rule of law, the legal system, and public institutions. Political elites in Kosovo are among those having the most positive views on how the European perspective has impacted the country economically and in terms of overall reforms. “Economically, we've been doing really well in recent years ... domestically regarding reforms, energy transition, democracy, civic liberties, political rights, we've been progressing really well, especially in recent years”, said a policy maker in Pristina (Ko.3, Interview with a policy maker in Kosovo, 2025). This positive view is shared by civil society elites who attribute reforms to conditionality, “... the commitments we undertook for digital transition, in particular for green transition, are things that we're doing because there are some conditionalities attached to them.... There were a lot of reforms undertaken because of the EU integration process. Some of them were because of direct conditionalities” (Ko.6, Interview with a civil society representative in Kosovo, 2025).

Interestingly, the positive impact on the security sector was mentioned by only a few interviewees in Georgia and Moldova. As an interviewee in Georgia said that “most of the border security management was set up with the help of the EU” (GE.4, Interview with a policy maker in Georgia, 2025). Interviewees in Moldova were more reserved about the positive but limited impact of EU’s policy on Moldova’s security: “...the EU has taken on a greater role in equipping our defense sector with modern technology. The EU has also played a significant role in combating Russian propaganda and cyberattacks in our region. It is crucial that this process continues and expands to cover the entire Eastern Partnership region” (MD.2, Interview with diplomat in Moldova, 2025)

The negative side of accession reforms. In the Western Balkans, there is an increasing perception that the socio-economic cost of reforms is high and countries are not rewarded: “We’ve paid a big price for these long accession talks and massive liberalisation...We’re applying state

aid rules to the strictest European standards. We destroyed half of our domestic companies due to these rules...But we rushed—public procurement, state aid, everything by the EU book. And we paid a huge economic price,” said an interviewee in Montenegro (MN.5, Interview with former high-level official for EU integration, 2025). Serbian and Bosnian interviewees were among the most critical of EU policies. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there was a notable convergence of views around the slow pace of progress in improving the economic and business environment. A main concern in WB is that while the EU is indisputably the main trading partner and donor of all CCs, elite voices express concern about the uneven distribution of benefits. Especially, elites from the civil society in Bosnia and North Macedonia pointed to socioeconomic inequalities at a regional level, brain drain and the negative impact on human capital (“enormous inequalities have emerged, particularly between urban elites and rural or working-class populations” (MK.6, Interview with journalist in North Macedonia, 2025). Serbian interviewees expressed a uniformly pessimistic view of the enlargement process. The high hopes once associated with accession, particularly in areas such as the rule of law, democracy, and good governance, have largely gone unfulfilled. Even the often-cited positive impact on civil society is questioned, with one NGO leader in Serbia noting that “... in reality, the authorities do not cooperate with civil society in practice” (SE10, Interview with NGO leader in Serbia, 2025). The inability of EU policy to halt brain drain frequently came up in interviews in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other Western Balkan countries. An interviewee in Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed pessimism about the demographic trends throughout the region, saying that it partly relates to the argument of living in countries that try to emulate a functioning liberal democracy, but essentially end up with copy-paste institutions that are not the real thing, so they emigrate (BA.3, Interview with academic in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025).

There is a widespread perception in WB6 **that reforms and EU financing do not reach ordinary citizens**. While measures like the visa-free regime are seen as having a tangible, positive impact on public perceptions of the EU, the benefits of legislative reforms or EU funding are often viewed as distant or abstract. Linked to that, is a common concern that emerged across interviews with elites both in the EU and the Western Balkan candidate countries that the EU is perceived as “primarily supporting **central authorities** and (urban) elites, rather than reaching out to local

communities” – including local authorities and populations in peripheral areas of the countries in question (EU.15, Interview with analyst in EU M/S, 2025).

For the EaP candidate countries, the accession negotiations are perceived as having provided a new strategic orientation, while also increasing public awareness of the EU’s significance. Elites in Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine offer a generally positive assessment of the Association Agreements and the DCFTA that preceded the candidacy status, particularly emphasising their economic benefits. They note that some tangible advantages – such as the visa-free regime – were achieved even before the formal launch of accession negotiations. However, concerns persist around the slow pace of implementation of reforms in Moldova and signs of backsliding in Georgia, particularly in the areas of governance and justice. In Moldova, interviewees expressed frustration with the limited tangible results achieved so far. Although the EU has provided some support in the security sector, Moldova remains highly vulnerable to geopolitical pressures, highlighting that the impact of EU enlargement in this area is still evolving. Georgian elites pointed out that Georgia’s EU path is a special case among the EaP countries, as the pro-EU attitude of the majority of the Georgian population was acknowledged and widespread decades before the war in Ukraine began (GE.6, Interview with former diplomat in Georgia, 2025). Indeed, only Georgian interviews referenced the formation of a European identity as a non-material effect of the country’s reforms: “Europeanization helped to form the identity, in my opinion, as a free European-type state, and in society, there was a sense that you are also part of it...Probably 30 years ago, you would have more in common with Russia than with Germany. And today, that’s not the case” (GE.10, Interview with NGO director in Georgia, 2025).

Another concern raised by elites from the wider civil society in all CCs, including academia, is that the **non-governmental organizations and stakeholders have been practically sidelined** in the accession process. In practice, the enlargement process primarily engages high-level government officials and senior public servants. As one academic noted: “for years, other stakeholders were either marginalized or not effectively included in the process” (GE11. Interview with representative of academia in Georgia, 2025).

The non-material impacts. While the EU tends to rely on indicators and a quantitative approach to assess alignment and reforms, several interviewees in candidate countries – both in the Western Balkans and EaP countries, and especially among business elites – emphasised the symbolic and

psychological impact of the enlargement process. As one interviewee explained: “The positive aspect was more symbolic and psychological. This means that companies, including international ones, that thought, or still think, Georgia will become an EU member, started looking at Georgia with greater interest.” (GE.7, Interview with representative of the International Chamber of Commerce in Georgia, 2025).

A similar emphasis on perception and expectation came from political elites in Serbia, who stressed the importance of high expectations and aspirational thinking even in the absence of concrete reform progress. As one opposition leader noted: “Unfortunately, we cannot speak much about the tangible impact in specific areas, but we can talk about public expectations regarding which areas would benefit the most from EU assistance and the accession process. Citizens' expectations are that the key areas are the judiciary, human rights, and freedoms, political, minority, and others, as well as media openness” (SE.5, Interview with leader of a pro-European opposition party in Serbia, 2025).

In contrast, some interviewees raised concerns about the deeper cultural and normative implications of accession – particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina – where EU integration is sometimes perceived as a potential identity threat. As one businessperson put it: “People are not convinced that they have to adapt their values to capitalism” (BA.1, Interview with business person in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025).

It is noteworthy that several respondents in the Western Balkans engaged in detailed discussions about the situation in neighbouring countries, **suggesting that perceptions of the EU’s impact are shaped not only by domestic experience but also through comparisons with “the other”**, including how EU policies affect fellow candidates or even neighbouring Balkan EU member states.

Perceptions about the financing of reforms. Interviewees in the candidate countries acknowledged the overall importance of the EU’s assistance in the reform process (primarily in infrastructure development), but they were more inclined to indicate its flaws. Many interviewees perceive EU’s financial assistance **as inefficient and primarily benefiting the elites rather than the wider population and the needs of the local communities**. A private sector representative in Moldova highlighted that: “Current pre-accession tools don’t fully reflect the high adaptation

pressure on Moldovan businesses, which must meet EU standards in record time” (MD. 8, Interview with private sector representative in Moldova, 2025). According to an NGO leader in Serbia (SE.10, Interview with an NGO leader in Serbia, 2025), the pre-accession assistance substantially helped the infrastructure building but fell short of supporting local communities: “Well, I think that pre-accession assistance has been very important. It achieved a lot, especially in terms of infrastructure, and it also did a lot in terms of supporting various institutions, small and medium-sized enterprises, and so on. However, I think it was not very well targeted toward local communities”. A major weakness put forward by various elites was the **lack of a communication strategy by the EU on the EU financing opportunities and benefits or due to local corruption**. “Regrettably, I haven’t used the possible funds that might exist to help people to do business here. There are issues of corruption here...” (BA.1, Interview with business person in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025). In Georgia too as an interviewee said, “... the package didn’t come with a communication strategy to explain to people that what was done was because the EU was helping us. This was generally a problem for everyone, all donors, and the civil sector as well, including the EU, many things that were done, whether in infrastructure, or in education or healthcare, they weren’t connected to the fact that this was the EU’s work. (NGO rep 1, Interview with NGO director, online, 20 March, 2025). **The most often mentioned problem was the political framework within which EU’s assistance has been used in the candidate countries**, either in the Western Balkans or in the EaP. Interviewees pointed to its **misuse by regimes to remain in power, to the lack of a national strategy on how the funds can be used, or to limited absorption capacity or simply to corruption**. Thus, an interviewee in Serbia (SE.2, Interview with expert in Serbia, 2025) acknowledged the benefits of the assistance but emphasized how it was used by an increasingly authoritarian regime to consolidate power: “The assistance that was directed in accordance with EU regulations and procedures certainly contributed to a sense of some improvement among Serbian citizens ... However, there is another side to the story, and that is that a large portion of the assistance served to promote the authoritarian government in Serbia, which didn’t miss a single photo opportunity to boast about opening various projects, thus promoting its own policy with European money”. Despite the criticisms of the EU, **most interviewees ultimately placed the burden of responsibility on domestic elites**. As an interviewee in Montenegro put it, the real issue lies in implementation: “We don’t even execute the small capital

budget we have in our state budget, so everything additional that's allocated just doesn't get implemented" (MN.8, Interview with an analyst in Montenegro, 2025).

3.2 ANTICIPATED CHALLENGES AHEAD

Several challenges regarding the EU accession process emerged from the interviews, resulting from the experience of implementing reforms so far. While some are country-specific, such as the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine, the constitutional reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, or tied to the unique historical and socio-political contexts of individual regions, the sample of interviews reveals a high degree of consensus around the broader, future challenges facing the enlargement process. The key challenges identified by elites both in the EU and the CCs include:

Turning enlargement into a people-oriented process and ensuring public support. Elites on both sides – the EU and the candidate countries in the Western Balkans and EaP – emphasise that the EU must embody a broader, more inclusive vision. Enlargement should be framed as a socially-oriented process, one that is universally responsive and ensures inclusivity. As one interviewee put it, it should be focused on “addressing the needs of all communities, not just those in power” (EU.15, Interview with analyst in EU M/S, 2025).

Addressing socioeconomic challenges. To ensure support to enlargement and actual success of accession, the EU must address both social and economic challenges in the candidate countries, fostering a fair and sustainable integration process. While accession offers clear benefits, such as increased investment and economic opportunities, candidate countries may struggle with exposure to open competition and the risk of deepening inequalities. Socio-economic risks, including demographic challenges must therefore be mitigated by “strengthening state institutions to better manage market integration and preventing economic vulnerabilities” (EU.14, Interview with Italian expert, 2025).

Countering democratic backsliding in both candidate countries and existing EU member states. In candidate countries, the erosion of democratic norms and the rise of authoritarian tendencies undermine the credibility and sustainability of the accession process. Without a reversal of these trends and substantive progress in democratisation, both EU enlargement and long-term

political stability will remain elusive. At the same time, democratic regression in some member states – most notably Hungary – is perceived as another challenge for enlargement. In the eyes of the elites in the CCs, the EU is losing its ethical power, while for the elites in the EU, it demonstrates that enlargement cannot proceed unless the new members uphold strong democratic norms before joining (EU.10, Interview with a member of the National Parliament in Greece, 2025).

Seizing on institutional dysfunctionalities in EU decision-making structures as an opportunity for reform. The biggest challenge for the EU relates to institutional tensions embedded in its decision-making process – particularly the unanimity requirement – and the persistence of “sovereignist” attitudes, which risk derailing not only enlargement but deeper integration itself. As one interviewee warned, these trends could “reduce the Union to a purely intergovernmental structure” (Interview with Italian Expert, online, 26 March 2025). Furthermore, the financing of major EU initiatives – such as the Green Deal, European Defense and Common Agricultural Policy – will require substantial funds and building consensus, which “may delay the progress of Enlargement” (EU.3, Interview with former Vice-President of the European Parliament, 2025)

Upholding the transformative potential of enlargement. There is a dominant perception that the enlargement process is losing its transformative edge due to its fading credibility generally and its conditionality principle in particular, and to the shifting focus away from implementing pre-accession reforms to addressing political conditions set by EU member states (quote). This is also due, in part, to the prevalence of superficial reforms pursued by domestic elites who lack genuine political commitment to European integration. Where political will is strong, reforms tend to be more sustained and impactful and that is a key challenge for the future. As an interviewee in Kosovo put it, “So, the EU is a force for good [...], I think this is the starting base [...] and when you have a government that believes in the EU and what they stand for in terms of values, then I think it is easy to be impacted positively by the EU” (Ko.2, Interview with a policy maker in Kosovo, 2025). At the same time, the process is increasingly perceived as transactional, shaped as much by political expediency on both sides as by normative alignment. The politicisation of accession criteria further compounds this problem, undermining trust in the process and weakening the ability of the EU to foster meaningful change. Furthermore, the various layers filtering EU’s voice, have weakened it. As a journalist in Bosnia and Herzegovina explained, there are so many

layers between Brussels and the member states; everything is watered down (BA.6, Interview with journalist in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025).

Keeping faith in EU accession. Across interviews in CCs, a growing sense of disillusionment emerged with the EU enlargement process itself. Many cited its limited ability to deliver tangible, evenly distributed benefits, particularly outside urban centres. Others pointed to the EU's perceived tolerance of stabilitocracies and a lack of political will to confront illiberal trends. The Union's positive impact is often poorly communicated, and its credibility as a transformative force is increasingly questioned.

Overcoming internal EU divisions between member states on enlargement. A deeper political challenge raised in interviews with EU elites is the ambivalence – and sometimes outright scepticism – of certain member states toward further enlargement. Not all governments appear to share a clear long-term vision for Europe, and some are hesitant even about the accession of Western Balkan candidates. This lack of consensus contributes to a deliberate or tacit prolongation of the process.

Enhancing the visibility and strategic communication of EU's policy. There is a widespread concern that there is a lack of visibility around the EU's policies, funding instruments, and the positive impact of the enlargement process as “the EU is not equipped to communicate what it's doing” (BA.4, Interview with NGO representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025). This is a common perception among elites in the CCs and the EU.

Responding to the shock of the war in Ukraine and its future outcome. EU elites widely emphasised that the way the war in Ukraine ends will reshape Europe's political and institutional landscape. This view is strongly shared by elites in the EaP candidate countries, though less prominently in the Western Balkans. For Ukraine itself, the war with Russia remains the defining challenge, placing extraordinary strain on the country's human and institutional capacities.

4. TAKING UP THE VARIABLE GEOMETRY OF ACCESSION

While both candidate countries and EU/member state officials largely agree on the benefits of a phased accession process, their underlying motivations often differ. Bridging this divergence – between strategic, geopolitical calculations on the EU side and expectations of early, tangible

benefits on the candidate side – is essential to maintaining trust and momentum in the process. Attitudes towards the implementation of integration are described below.

4.1 PHASED INTEGRATION: SUITABLE FOR ALL?

There is general support for gradual integration, but for different reasons. Most interviewees in the candidate countries support a phased integration into EU institutions as a way to maintain momentum and manage domestic reforms. It is noteworthy that support for phased integration fades away in the candidate countries that are closer to accession. For example, interviewees in Montenegro overwhelmingly reject the idea, arguing that such an approach leaves candidates vulnerable to third actors' influence and, in any case, fits those falling behind.

Countries facing existential threats – most notably Ukraine – are leveraging the current geopolitical momentum to press for accelerated integration, prioritising speed over gradual integration. As an interview in Ukraine put it, “I assess staged accession positively, but only if it begins immediately...” (UA.8, Interview with journalist in Ukraine, 2025). This reflects a broader pattern in which geopolitical urgency amplifies impatience with intermediate statuses and strengthens demands for swift, unambiguous integration.

For EU and member state officials, phased integration is primarily viewed as a pragmatic mechanism to manage enlargement more dynamically. It offers candidate countries early access to certain benefits, allows for the gradual adoption of EU norms and institutions, and avoids the immediate complexities of full membership. As a former member of the European Parliament explained: “It gives the candidate the opportunity to... 'digest' EU laws and regulations gradually and therefore absorb their content ... It gives the EU the chance to broaden its knowledge of the 'newcomer' and thus make appropriate adjustments when necessary” (EU.3, Interview with former member of the European Parliament, 2025)

Although there is general support for the concept of phased enlargement, significant divergences persist over its implementation, with varying expectations, conditions, and fears about potential entrenchment of second-class status for new members (as presented later).

Gradual integration delivers tangible benefits ahead of accession. Political and non-political elites alike in both the EU and candidate countries agree that early, partial integration can yield concrete advantages, such as access to funding, markets, or institutional participation, which help

sustain public support, reward political reformers, and foster pro-EU sentiment, especially when the full membership process remains stalled. "If we cannot have full membership now, at least give us access to the market and decision-making", said an interviewee in North Macedonia, echoing a dominant perception of elites in candidate countries (MK.1, Interview with journalist in North Macedonia 2025). An interviewee in Albania stressed the importance of engaging candidate countries in EU bodies and technical committees (in sectors such as telecommunications or energy) as an integral part of the accession process (AL.5, Interview with an academic in Albania, 2025). Several interviewees view the tangible benefits that come with phased accession as critical to demonstrating the value of reforms, maintaining momentum in the accession process, and as proof that candidate countries are not only mere policy recipients. "If we get to use the benefits of Europe, even partially, people will start believing again," said an interviewee in North Macedonia (MK.8, Interview with diplomat in North Macedonia, 2025). An interlocutor from Serbia described phased accession as a "win-win" situation where the EU gains more control over the process, while citizens in the candidate countries enjoy increasing benefits from the accession process (SE.2 Interview with expert and think tanker in Serbia, 2025).

Yet it is only a pathway – not a substitute – for full EU membership. A shared understanding among elites in both the EU and candidate countries is that phased integration must function as a stepping stone toward full membership, not as a substitute for it. This perspective helps counter fears of candidates becoming trapped in a perennial "waiting room" status. For example, Moldovan elites envisage it as providing a "dual-track approach"; namely, full integration as the long-term objective, but with incremental but concrete steps in the interim. This is mirrored by the views expressed by EU elites, with one interviewee stating that phased integration is generally seen as a preparatory step, not a replacement for full membership and it is practically linked to the renewed methodology providing access to candidate countries in specific areas where they are ready (EU.22, Interview with diplomat in EU M/S, 2025).

Transitional periods for new members are regarded as problematic, despite qualified support for it in certain policy areas. While transitional periods are broadly accepted for certain sensitive policy areas, such as the Common Agricultural Policy, there is strong resistance to arrangements that would institutionalise unequal membership. The prospect of "permanently [creating] two categories of Member States with bigger rights and smaller voting rights" is seen

by elites in the EU as fundamentally incompatible with the principles of EU governance and unlikely to be accepted by future members (EU.24, Interview with officer at the EEAS, 2025). The same concerns are aired by elites in Western Balkans “...the gradual integration of a country might be valid, but up to a certain point, until the institutional reforms in the EU probably are made, but that could not be as a final destination, that there will be second-level citizens and first-level citizens in the EU, otherwise the whole architecture of the EU could fall apart’ (AL.3, Interview with a business sector representative in Albania, 2025).

First and foremost, candidate countries wish phased integration to involve concrete steps.

While most candidate country elites express openness to phased integration, their support is contingent on its credibility. They demand clear, visible steps, defined timelines, and meaningful financial and/or institutional support to ensure the process is credible and leads to actual progress, not just further delays. As an interlocutor in Moldova put it, “gradual accession is credible only if there are clear benchmarks and mutual commitments that can’t be easily reversed” (MD.1, Interview with policy maker in Moldova, 2025). In this respect, access to the Single Market and eligibility for cohesion funds are also regarded as more impactful and politically salient. By contrast, EU officials tend to view phased integration through the lens of institutional design and internal constraints. Interviews suggest that while EU elites endorse the concept in principle, their concerns revolve around the political and procedural hurdles to its implementation within the EU itself. These concerns often seem distant from the immediate priorities of the candidate countries. This divergence creates a potential disconnect: candidate countries seek tangible progress, while EU actors warn that full implementation of a gradual approach might require significant changes to EU decision-making procedures, which are currently seen as impossible.

There are diverging concerns about phased integration leading to stagnation and “a la carte” membership. While both EU and candidate country elites express concerns about phased integration, the nature of these concerns differs. Candidate countries primarily fear that a phased approach could become a substitute for full membership, trapping them in a permanent “halfway house” status and eroding the credibility of the accession process. As an interviewee in North Macedonia put it, “alternatives might offer fewer obligations, but that also means fewer incentives for serious change” (MK.4, Interview with NGO representative in North Macedonia, 2025).

EU officials, by contrast, raise concerns about potential abuses or unintended consequences within the Union itself. These include indeed the risk of candidate countries becoming politically “stuck” mid-process but EU policy elites also stress the danger of a “free riding” problem by “sovereignist forces” in CCs selectively adopting EU norms without genuine commitment, reaping the benefits of partial integration with the EU without complying fully with the obligations of membership. Accordingly, one EU interviewee warned that “[the] risks include countries getting ‘stuck at some stage’ and never reaching full membership” (EU.24, Interview with officer at the EEAS, 2025). Another raised concerns that “some 'sovereignist forces' might use it for 'a la carte' integration, allowing elites to strengthen domestic positions without fully adhering to EU norms. Enhancing the transactional nature of accession too” (EU.9, Interview with policy maker in EU M/S, 2025).

Table 3: Perceptions on phased integration

Perception	Key statement
A dual-track approach is realistic	“While full membership remains the goal, interim solutions like enhanced sectoral cooperation or privileged access to markets can offer stability and predictability” (MD.6, Interview with policy maker in Moldova, 2025)
Phased integration might lead to ‘a la carte’ integration working only in favor of the CCs, not for the EU	"Some 'sovereignist forces' might use it for 'a la carte' integration, allowing elites to strengthen domestic positions without fully adhering to EU norms (EU.9, Interview with policy maker in Greece, 2025)
Need for a revised and accelerated process	“I assess staged accession positively, but only if they begin immediately. If they are postponed once again for an indefinite period, their significance will gradually diminish” (UA.8, Interview with journalist in Ukraine, 2025)
Phased integration is only for those lagging behind	“From the regional perspective, that idea of staged accession is based on the assumption that there is no progress. It makes sense to create incremental steps for those countries not close to membership. For Montenegro, it does not.” (MN.7, Interview with NGO Representative in Montenegro, 2025)

4.2 ENLARGEMENT: THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE

There is an overwhelming consensus among interviewees that alternatives to EU membership are not realistic.

From the EU side, EU elites argue **that alternatives to full EU membership should not be considered in the long run and** that there is a commitment of EU member states to enlargement, as regularly stated in the Council Conclusions (EU.5, Interview with EU Officer, 2025). EU elites also point out that the EU has to respect its promises made to candidate countries and that there are geopolitical considerations making enlargement an imperative for the EU's own interests. Indicative is the view of an EU diplomat stating that “a promise was made to the Western Balkans” that has to be respected, and they are “right at the heart of the continent” (EU.12, Interview with EU diplomat, 2025). There are “no substitute tools or parallel frameworks” that can replace full accession, especially for the Western Balkans (EU.12, Interview with EU diplomat, 2025). Multi-tier EU models as an end-goal are seen as problematic, potentially creating more issues than they solve by making existing and new members question their status (EU.1, Interview with EU Diplomat, 2025). Only substantial, tangible benefits, such as plannable access to the EU budget, could make a meaningful difference as an alternative (EU.23, Interview with private sector representative in EU M/S, 2025).

Although elites in candidate countries recognize that the current enlargement process faces significant challenges and that alternative approaches might be necessary, full membership remains the only option. First, elites in candidate countries view that there is no other alternative to what the EU offers. Indicatively, elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina share the view that despite deviations from the EU in foreign policy alignment, there is no alternative to eventual full EU membership for Bosnia, especially in economic development terms and the EU membership is one of the very few issues where internal political consensus exists (BA.9, Interview with politician in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025). Second, elites in the countries close to accession consider it fair to gain membership given the vast reforms and the cost they have already undertaken, a view put forward in North Macedonia where **alternatives were described as politically sensitive in a country that has already undergone substantial sacrifices for the sake of EU integration, including the name change** (MK Interview Report 2025). Third, some elites point to the security consequences of non-membership. Especially, elites in Kosovo frame accession in security terms: “Apart from full membership, in my view, nothing can guarantee that seemingly small disputes in

the region cannot get out of proportion” (Ko.6, Interview with a civil society representative in Kosovo, 2025).

Alternatives such as joining other regional groupings or neutrality are dismissed by elites in candidate countries as non-options. A former policy maker in Georgia (GE.2, Interview with former policy maker in Georgia 2025), just like an interviewee in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA.2, Interview with NGO representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025) considered “neutrality” as irrelevant in today’s security environment in Europe. Fora like the European Political Community are perceived as mere “talking shops” that cannot compare to EU membership, while other regional groupings such as the Eurasian Economic Union are perceived by elites in EaP countries as “subordination” to non-democratic actors. EU membership remains the only option “because of standards of political life, democracy, education standards, civil society strength, because of health standards, because of security and welfare, that’s why” (GE.2, Interview with former policy maker in Georgia, 2025). Alternatives to membership might come with more problems for the candidate countries and Europe as a whole, according to CCs’ interviewees. As an interviewee in Serbia put it, “What’s the bottom line from the Western Balkans’ perspective is that if an alternative to EU membership is introduced, we will witness only the strengthening of conservatism, the rise of nationalism, and depopulation of the region” (SE.2 Interview with expert and think tanker in Serbia, 2025).

5. ENLARGEMENT UNDER GEOPOLITICAL STRAIN

While candidate country elites broadly acknowledge the geopolitical rationale underpinning the EU’s enlargement policy, particularly as a response to regional instability and external interference, there is widespread scepticism about its effectiveness in practice as regards the presence of rival geopolitical actors.

5.1 ADDRESSING GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRY

Even though short of a geopolitical strategy, elites interviewed consistently perceive EU enlargement as having important geopolitical ramifications, with one Moldovan policy maker noting that “enlargement sends a message of irreversibility” (MD.6, Interview with policy maker

in Moldova, 2025). However, doubts persist about the EU's capacity to act as a coherent geopolitical actor, especially when viewed within a broader global context marked by assertive rival powers. As a Georgian interviewee put it, "I would be very skeptical to expect from the EU that they could counter the influences of other actors. And when I see the shift of the current world order, I don't expect that much from the EU" (GE.4, Interview with policy maker in Georgia, 2025). This dual perception underscores both the symbolic importance of enlargement and the perceived limits of the EU's strategic leverage. The most prominent perceptions of elites in candidate countries include the following:

The accession perspective has not diminished the presence and importance of other global and regional actors with which the candidate countries in the Western Balkans and the EaP region share cultural, historical, economic, or wider strategic ties. Nevertheless, **enlargement is perceived as increasingly shaping the candidate countries' relations with other global and regional players.** This is to be expected as "if a country aspires to become a member of the EU, it should align its foreign and security policy", said a policy maker from Kosovo (Ko.3, Interview with a policy maker in Kosovo, 2025). This expected (and welcomed by most elites) foreign policy alignment is questioned by some interviewees in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia who argue that, as the Western Balkans is historically a place where East meets West, "playing both [EU-Russia] sides makes geopolitical sense" (BA.2, Interview with NGO representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025).

Furthermore, interviewees in candidate countries recognise that the presence of actors beyond the EU in the Western Balkans and EaP regions is not only inevitable, but in several cases, historically grounded. "There are two countries where I think you have sort of more special relationships, the US and Turkey for historical cultural reasons, but also for pragmatic reasons", mentioned an academic in Albania (AL.5, Interview with an academic in Albania, 2025). Their approach to geopolitical competition is largely pragmatic: most do not perceive all external actors as direct rivals to the EU. The main exception is Russia, which is predominantly framed as a geopolitical threat, particularly in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. In contrast, concerns in parts of the Western Balkans are often more regional and internal in focus. Elites in Montenegro, Kosovo, and, to some extent, Bosnia and Herzegovina frequently identify Serbia – not global powers – as the primary source of geopolitical contestation. As an interviewee from Kosovo put it, "the biggest problem is that the main malign influence in the region, in our view, comes through channels that are directed

from Serbia, both in Kosovo and in Bosnia. And I think this is an important aspect, also for the democratisation of Serbian society...” (Ko.6, Interview with a civil society representative in Kosovo, 2025). This reflects a layered understanding of influence, in which local dynamics and historical grievances shape the perception of threat more than global rivalry.

Interviewees indicate that elites in candidate countries share the view **that accession to the EU is not blocking (and will not end) the “special” or “strategic” relations of CCs with third countries**. Even the most pro-EU elites in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia acknowledge the significance of maintaining strategic cooperation with the US, with the United States seen as an enabler, not a rival, of EU influence. Elites in both candidate countries and within the EU consistently view the US not as a geopolitical competitor, but as a supportive one. As an elite from the business community of Albania put it rather than contesting the EU’s role, the US is perceived as a facilitator of EU’s geopolitical weight and a driver of democratization, “the judicial reform, for example, was done because the US somehow forced, let’s say, even those politicians that they were against...” (AL.3, Interview with a business sector representative in Albania, 2025). That is a view also shared by EU elites interviewed. As an EU officer put it, “in Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine it was very often not so much the EU supporting awareness campaigns on the benefits of the association agreement. It was USAID supporting local NGOs and media to explain what the EU is” (EU.18, Interview with EEAS representative, 2025). However, concerns are expressed about the potential waning of US engagement or a lack of strategic coordination between Washington and Brussels. As one interviewee in an EU member state noted, the absence of a unified Western voice can undermine the EU’s credibility and projection of influence (EU.9, Interview the policy maker in EU M/S 2025). A similar concern was aired by an elite in Ukraine: “Trump's coming to power in the United States has further aggravated the already difficult situation in the European Union” and makes the EU reconsider its enlargement and neighbourhood policies (UA.5, Interview with NGO representative in Ukraine, 2025). A banker in Montenegro expressed a more cautious view of the US's role (under any administration) it has “guided very divisive policies which were steering the region away from the EU, despite completely different rhetoric” (MN.6, Interview with a banker in Montenegro, 2025).

Turkey is also perceived by elites in CCs as a regional player who is not a geopolitical rival to the EU. Rather, Turkey’s economic and cultural influence – particularly in the Western Balkans – is

largely seen as complementary to the EU. In the case of Georgia, Turkey's regional security presence is even welcomed as a counterbalance to Russian influence. As a Georgian policy maker put it, "Turkey can play a role in order to counterbalance the Russian threats..." (GE.8, Interview with public servant in Georgia, 2025). Similarly, an interviewee from North Macedonia remarked that "Turkey has been smart in how it engages through identity and history" (MK.9, Interview with an academic in North Macedonia, 2025).

Chinese influence is viewed by all elites in the CCs through an economic lens in the context of infrastructure development and economic leverage, but it is not perceived as posing a direct geopolitical threat to the EU. As an interviewee in Bosnia and Herzegovina mentioned, most people feel that China is too insignificant to pose a risk (BA.1, Interview with a business person in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025). Chinese presence is either viewed throughout the region as "limited but growing", which might be further limited by the EU accession process as a result of adopting the EU *acquis* and trade policy (MD Interview Report 2025), or as opportunistic and malign as it is supportive of authoritarianism (GE.1, Interview with expert-civil society representative in Georgia, 2025). Still, China's increasing power in the Western Balkans and EaP countries raises worries for the EU's enlargement process, as it is believed that its economic involvement is causing dependency and may be taking attention away from EU integration in the region. Elites on the EU side view China as a systemic rival that may undermine the European project: Chinese companies are often perceived by locals as attractive partners because they operate with fewer constraints—benefiting from lower standards, limited conditionality, and faster delivery (EU.7, Interview with policy maker in EU M/S, 2025). This positions China, from an EU perspective, as a significant long-term competitor to the EU in critical sectors such as transport and energy infrastructure (EU.23, Interview with private sector representative in EU M/S 2025). The challenge, as one source put it, lies in the EU learning to engage with China "without excessive fear or overreaction" (EU.14, Interview with Italian expert, 2025). Nevertheless, the key concern expressed by both EU and interviewees in CCs is not merely China's presence but the Union's own vulnerabilities being leveraged against it; **the risk of external actors exploiting internal EU divisions** – a dynamic explicitly flagged by elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BA.7, Interview with politician in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025).

Russia's influence is diminishing but still strategically present. Elites across the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries broadly agree that EU enlargement policy – alongside

the association agreements in the EaP region – has significantly diminished Russia’s leverage, particularly in strategic sectors such as energy and the economy (as in the case of Moldova). However, this erosion of leverage is attributed primarily to Russia’s own actions: the invasion of Ukraine is seen as a turning point that has sharply reduced Moscow’s soft power across the region. “Russia no longer has much pull at the elite level”, said an interviewee in North Macedonia (MK.10, Interview with an academic, 2025). While Moscow’s economic role is now increasingly perceived as limited in countries such as Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Georgia, elites underscore that it remains strategically present in other domains. This includes politically driven projects, capture of specific elites, and control or manipulation of media ecosystems. Moldova provides an instructive example. As a policy maker in Moldova put it, the accession process has constrained Russia’s reach in terms of both energy dependency and political sway. Nonetheless, Moscow continues to exert selective influence through unresolved conflicts like Transnistria, as well as through enduring cultural, linguistic, and geopolitical ties. Similarly, a Georgian interviewee noted that Russian influence is stubborn: “... for example, in the Western Balkans they can’t erase it completely, how many years Serbia has been involved in the enlargement process, and there are still Russian influences there... (GE.1, Interview with civil society representative in Georgia, 2025).

Elites in the Western Balkans and Georgia, where a growing presence of *Middle East and Gulf actors is noticed*, have framed their influence in negative terms. They may not be in a position to derail the accession process but they undermine the rule of law (as in Albania), and an interviewee in Kosovo warned against their “malign influence in terms of radicalization” (Ko.9, Interview with a journalist in Kosovo, 2025).

Enlargement is seen not only as shielding candidate countries from geopolitical rivals, but also as reinforcing the EU’s own strategic position. Elites in candidate countries emphasise that the benefits of enlargement extend beyond reducing their own vulnerability to malign external influence or limiting dependence on rival powers. They argue that enlargement actively enhances the EU’s strategic autonomy and geopolitical actorness. In this view, integrating new members does not merely protect the neighbourhood—it strengthens the EU. By incorporating states with strong geopolitical stakes (such as Ukraine), the EU not only curtails rival influence in its neighbourhood but also reinforces its own capacity to project power beyond it—particularly in

regions like Central Asia. As one Ukrainian private sector representative put it, “In fact, Ukraine might even help reduce China’s influence within the EU rather than increase it” (UA.9, Interview with private sector representative in Ukraine, 2025). Others are doubtful, they believe that enlargement will not automatically enhance EU’s strategic positioning: “I don’t have any illusions that the membership of today’s Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina would contribute to the EU’s influence in international relations... On the contrary, the membership of these countries as they are, would not even narrow the maneuvering space [of their governments] ... they would stand with one foot in Russia and the other in the EU” (SE.2, Interview with expert in Serbia, 2025).

No matter what the various elites believe about the actual geopolitical impact of enlargement, they all seem to converge on the view that **the geopolitical vacuum left by EU’s lack of strategic positioning in the Western Balkans and the EaP region is filled by other actors**: “There is a vacuum and others are more than ready to fill it”, said an interviewee in North Macedonia (MK.1, Interview with policy maker, 2025).

The conditions of the geopolitical force of enlargement. Interviewees across candidate countries consistently framed the geopolitical relevance of EU enlargement as conditional, not automatic. Whether enlargement contributes to the EU’s actorness or is undermined by rival powers depends on several interrelated factors:

- **The Nature of the Accession Process: Technical vs. Geopolitical.** Many interviewees argue that the current accession framework remains overly technocratic and fails to match the geopolitical realities of the region. As an interviewee in Albania explained: “EU enlargement was not geopolitical. It has to be geopolitical. It has been driven by the *acquis*. But other actors’ policies such as Russia, China, and Turkey, are driven by geopolitics” (Al.4, Interview with civil society representative in Albania, 2025).
- **Strategic Autonomy and Multi-Vector Foreign Policy.** Some interviewees highlighted the willingness of candidate countries to maintain a degree of strategic autonomy. In certain cases – most notably Serbia – this manifests as a deliberate multi-vector foreign policy, balancing engagement with both Western and non-Western actors. While Serbia is formally aligned with the EU accession process, it continues to signal its independence through selective non-alignment with EU foreign policy positions. This logic is seen by some as geopolitically rational rather than ideological. A Bosnian NGO representative

remarked that “playing both sides makes geopolitical sense” (BA.2, Interview with NGO representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025). A similar rationale is evident in Kosovo and Albania, though with a different emphasis: both stress their special strategic ties with the United States, which they do not see as incompatible with EU alignment. In contrast, elites in other countries, such as Montenegro, reject this logic and emphasise an unambiguous commitment to EU integration, despite frustrations with the EU’s perceived lack of coherence. A former senior official said: “We’re kind of stunned by the EU’s disorientation, but we’re going that way, no matter what. We’ve placed our bet on that card. There’s no policy of non-alignment. Just one path, one card...” (MN.5, Interview with former high-level official for EU Integration in Montenegro, 2025). These different positions highlight that perceptions about strategic autonomy versus EU integration are not uniform. They range from full Western alignment to flexible balancing strategies, shaped by national histories, external relationships, and domestic political cultures.

- **The credibility of enlargement.** Some interviewees noted that the weakening credibility of the enlargement promise – marked by delays and policy ambiguity – creates space for rival actors to increase influence. As a Serbian diplomat put it, the long uncertainty of EU accession strengthened the narratives that Serbia will never be part of the European Union, making “room for perhaps some other influences that are omnipresent in, especially in the Western Balkans” (SE.8, Interview with Serbian diplomat, 2025). Similarly, a journalist from North Macedonia warned that “...If the EU keeps sending mixed signals, it will lose the region, not to ideology, but to pragmatism” (MK.3, Interview with journalist in North Macedonia, 2025).
- **Prioritizing alignment with EU’s foreign and security policy.** As a Georgian academic explained: “...if [the EU] is to play a geopolitical role, a bigger part of the enlargement process has to be a more defined understanding of the candidate countries’ alignment with EU’s foreign and security policy” (GE.11, Interview with an academic in Georgia, 2025).
- **The diminishing of the relative relevance of the EU.** While the EU remains a normative power, its material capabilities are increasingly challenged in global terms, even in the strategic domains in which it is strongest, like trade, investment, and infrastructure.

According to a Ukrainian private sector representative, “China remains such a dominant player that even the US does not match its economic influence” (UA.9, Interview with private sector representative in Ukraine 2025). Likewise, a Moldovan interviewee said, “China and Turkey still offer attractive business incentives. The EU must complement values with real, accessible investment frameworks” (MD.8, Interview with private sector representative in Moldova, 2025).

Table 4: Selected Perceptions of EU’s enlargement effects on geopolitical rivalry

Perception	Statement
The EU cannot counterbalance other actors’ influence given the global dynamics	“I would be very sceptical to expect from the EU that they could counter the influences of other actors. And when I see the shift of the current world order, I don’t expect that much from the EU” (GE.4, Interview with policy maker in Georgia, 2025)
Geopolitical actors exploit the policy inconsistencies and political vacuum left by the EU in the candidate countries	“It’s EU’s inconsistencies in the enlargement process that have allowed others to enter...There is a vacuum, and others are ready to fill in” (MK.1, Interview with policy maker in North Macedonia, 2025)
The enlargement policy increases the EU’s own strategic position	“In fact, Ukraine might even help reduce China’s influence within the EU rather than increase it” (UA.9, Interview with private sector representative in Ukraine, 2025)

- **The EU’s inconsistent strategic posture.** Interviewees pointed to the EU’s internal divergences and lack of strategic coherence as undermining its geopolitical power. As an interviewee from North Macedonia put it: “It’s the EU’s inconsistencies in the enlargement process that have allowed others to enter...There is a vacuum, and others are ready to fill in” (MK.1, Interview with policy maker in North Macedonia, 2025). EU elites agree that although the EU has the tools and the capacity to address geopolitical rivalry, it lacks strategic thinking (EU.11, Interview with diplomat in EU M/S, 2025). They equally emphasize the lack of strategic communication: “We have a very bad communication strategy. I think that’s one of the most important things. We need a much better communication strategy” (EU.20, Interview with a member of the European Parliament, 2025). Some, however, are sceptical, arguing that geopolitical thinking can be “detrimental” (EU.15, Interview with an analyst in EU M/S, 2025).
- **The EU’s ability to address defence concerns.** Although elites in the candidate countries (particularly in the Western Balkan candidate countries which are also members of NATO) do not explicitly condition the EU’s geopolitical reach on the latter’s ability to act as a security provider

through (hard) power, the EU elites are more concerned about it. A former member of the European Parliament expressed a concern that the “EU cannot compete with other geopolitical actors easily. Russia is important for Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in the security domain” (EU.3, Interview with former Vice-President of the European Parliament, 2025). According to a diplomat of an EU member state: “...when, for example, Serbia sees that the EU cannot help it in its security concerns, or that the Pristina-Belgrade Dialogue under the EU does not work, then Serbia finds alternatives to the EU” (EU.11, Interview with diplomat in EU M/S, 2025).

5.2 THE EU ENLARGEMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF THE RUSSIAN WAR ON UKRAINE

Although enlargement has always carried geopolitical weight, elites across both the EU and candidate countries agree that the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has re-centred geopolitics and security at the heart of the enlargement process, after a prolonged period in which enlargement was largely framed as a bureaucratic and technical undertaking. This is one of the strongest areas of consensus among interviewed elites. The following views emerged from the interviews:

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is widely perceived as an exogenous shock, constituting a turning point in EU enlargement policy. What is, however, interesting to note, is that despite its “shock” effect, the war in Ukraine was not mentioned by the elites interviewed in the EU and the Western Balkans as impacting their pro-enlargement sentiment, in contrast to those in the EaP countries. As an interviewee in Albania put it, “I can firmly confirm that nothing happening in the past years, including the war in Ukraine, has changed the perception of how Albanians want to join the EU” (AL.1, Interview with a policy maker in Albania, 2025). On the contrary, as a policy maker in Moldova argued, the conflict gave new weight to Moldova’s European aspirations: “The war showed us that neutrality and indecision are not viable” (MD.5, Interview with policy maker in Moldova, 2025).

Renewed momentum for a geopolitical enlargement. A main takeaway from the interviews is that both sides recognize that the war has revived a process that had largely stalled. While candidate countries like Ukraine perceive this as an urgent opportunity for accelerated progress, EU officials acknowledge the revival while also grappling with the implications for the long-standing merit-based approach. For elites in the EU, the challenge lies in ensuring that security

considerations do not undermine the credibility of the EU's merit-based approach (MD. 9, Interview with advisor at the European Parliament, 2025). Still, there is consensus among all elites that the war has shifted the enlargement discourse away from "alignment" and "transformation" towards "resilience", "geopolitics", and "security".

An interviewee in the EU attributed the shift in the EU's enlargement policy to the Russian invasion of Ukraine having "[shaken] EU member states out of a certain complacency rooted in the belief that Europe was a continent free from conflicts of this kind" (IT.2, Interview with EU diplomat, online, 14 April 2025). As another interviewee said, the EU's swift response to the war altered the long-standing perception of enlargement as a slow, technocratic process (AT.2, Interview with policy maker in EU M/S, 2025). Indeed, enlargement is now predominantly viewed as a "geopolitical instrument" (EU.19, Interview with EC official, 2025). An interviewee in Moldova presented the view that "the EU granted candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia precisely to eliminate the so-called grey zone between the EU and Russia" (MD.4, Interview with NGO representative in Moldova, 2025). Still, EU elites reaffirm that delivering tangible reforms, particularly against corruption, is a non-negotiable part of the process (MN.8, Interview with analyst in Montenegro, 2025).

Referring to the impact of the invasion of Ukraine, one interviewee explained that Bosnia and Herzegovina suddenly became a candidate, and this was "sort of arbitrary" because "it was not like we earned a promotion" (BA.1, Interview with business person in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025). Most interviewees in Montenegro felt that the country had benefited the most from this geopolitical shift triggered by the war in Ukraine, often citing its size as its greatest advantage. A member of the Parliament of Montenegro positively assessed the impact of the EU's renewed interest but noted a reversal in perception: Before the war in Ukraine, Montenegro appeared more eager to join the EU than the EU was to welcome it. Now, the roles have reversed (MN.1, Interview with policy maker in Montenegro, 2025). Interviewees in Montenegro also noted that this new momentum had altered regional dynamics, particularly between Montenegro and Albania (MN.7, Interview with NGO Representative in Montenegro, 2025). For Albanian elites, too, there is a perception that the war has not diversified the EU's interest away from the WB. On the contrary, it sped up the process in WB: "It took a war to actually wake up on the need to accelerate this process, and you know now the EU is accelerating also to quite a great extent the accession process with Ukraine and Moldova, but as you know, for countries who have been there and doing their

homework as we [Albanians] did, we also have expectations that this system will be sped up, and well, we are actually quite satisfied that the Commission has been taking this sort of a new wave of momentum very seriously” (AL.1, Interview with policy maker in Albania, 2025.)

“Big Promises, Distant Future”. Some observers in the EU and WB countries are cautious, noting that the war generated “big promises but with a distant future in mind” (EU.15, Interview with analyst in EU M/S, 2025), pointing to a widening gap between political rhetoric and the reality of integration. Civil society elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina also express concern despite renewed hopes for a new momentum: “There has been no delivery on the WB6 governments’ side.” (BA.4, Interview with NGO representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2025). While the acceleration of Ukraine and Moldova’s applications is widely seen as a politically driven response to the invasion, many caution that this momentum may prove temporary. As one EU respondent put it, the same structural obstacles that have long hampered enlargement are likely to reassert themselves once the initial urgency fades (AT.2, Interview with policy maker in EU M/S, 2025).

There is no consensus on changes to the enlargement toolbox. While there is broad acknowledgement that the war in Ukraine has reinvigorated the EU’s enlargement, elite views diverge on what this should mean for the enlargement methodology: whether it requires a fundamental revision, a recalibration of the merit-based approach, or the adoption of a more flexible, variable-geometry model of accession. The swift granting of candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia reflects a geopolitical urgency rather than a shared consensus on overhauling the enlargement toolbox. All interviewees acknowledge the exceptional circumstances that have temporarily sidelined traditional readiness criteria. While candidate countries such as Ukraine see this as an opening for accelerated accession, EU officials are more cautious, recognising the momentum, but also emphasising the need to preserve the integrity of the merit-based approach. One issue that was aired by elites in the EaP is the need for the EU to reconsider the existing accession mode under the reality of candidate countries with territories under occupation and war. As an interviewee put it, “The EU must adapt its enlargement process for candidate countries like Ukraine and Moldova, which face war or territorial disputes due to the presence of Russian forces... the EU should consider a flexible approach that allows integration to proceed despite unresolved conflicts” (UA.1, Interview with analyst in Ukraine, 2025). This issue, however, is not considered by EU elites.

Table 5: Selected perceptions on the impact of the war in Ukraine on enlargement

Perception	Key statement
A wake-up call for the EU	The conflict “shook EU member states out of a certain complacency” (EU.12, Interview with EU diplomat, 2025) “The Russian invasion of Ukraine simply showed the European Union that the destabilization of its immediate surroundings can, in fact, cause a lot of damage... so the EU came up with a growth plan...” (SE.6, Interview with journalist in Serbia, 2025)
A window of opportunity	“The EU’s geopolitical awakening provides Moldova with a chance it didn’t have before – but we must act quickly, while enlargement is still a strategic priority” (MD.6, Interview with policy maker in Moldova, 2025)
A geopolitical turn of enlargement	The war made enlargement a geopolitical tool, not just a technical process (UA.7, Interview with NGO representative in Ukraine, 2025) The geopolitical situation changed, and enlargement is, at last, seen as a geopolitical instrument.” (MD.11, interview with EC official, March 19, 2025)
Tying enlargement to security	“The EU must align enlargement with broader defense and security strategies to reinforce stability in the region while safeguarding the credibility of its commitments” (UA.2, Interview with political analyst in Ukraine, 2025).
Frustration about double standards	“...It’s about—and here comes a bit of anger from someone coming from the Western Balkans, and I speak on behalf of other colleagues—two countries that overnight became candidates... But on the other hand, you have, let’s ignore Serbia, you have Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, from the same kind of geopolitics, has been actually without progress in the process for so many years (SE.1, Interview with senior policy maker in Serbia, 2025)

Re-politicization and double standards? There are concerns among elites in candidate countries in the Western Balkans about the fairness and impact of expediting the enlargement process. The rapid advancement of Ukraine and Moldova, widely seen by the EU as a geopolitical success, though welcome, has also generated palpable frustration and disillusionment among longer-standing candidate countries in the Western Balkans. An interviewee from the civil society in Serbia voiced that perception as follows: “Given everything that was imposed as preconditions and conditions on the entire Western Balkans — not just Serbia — it did feel somewhat unfair, and I personally experienced it as unfair” (SE.10, Interview with NGO leader in Serbia, 2025).

This perception of unequal treatment or shifting goalposts is particularly prominent in interviews with elites from the candidate countries in WB, who view it as damaging to the credibility of the enlargement process. In contrast, EU elites tend not to highlight this concern, suggesting a possible downplaying – or overlooking – of its political implications. Equally, not all elites share the view that merit and fairness have been compromised. As a policy maker in Albania put it, “regardless of any sort of volatility coming from politics in the larger EU arena, citizens in this country and also the government of Albania is very firm on, first of all, acknowledging that we know and we acknowledge that this is a merit-based process ...in a way the war in Ukraine was a wake-up call to actually stick also to the carrots, not only stick to the sticks” (AL.1, Interview with a policy maker in Albania, 2025).

Tying security to enlargement. The Russian invasion of Ukraine created a new sense of urgency among elites in the EU by underscoring the deep interdependence between the EU and its neighbors, including the Western Balkans (EU.7, Interview with policy maker in EU M/S, 2025). For elites in the EU, “now it is the time to undertake the necessary institutional reforms to be able to act geopolitically” (EU.22, Interview with diplomat in EU M/S, 2025). For other elites in the EU, the war had an impact primarily on their views about the imperative of building the EU’s defence capabilities rather than on the enlargement policy per se. Accordingly, not only rule of law and fundamentals are a priority, but closer alignment with the EU’s foreign and defence policies should come to the forefront of enlargement (EU.9, Interview with policy maker in EU M/S, 2025).

From the EaP elites’ perspective, the war in Ukraine redefined enlargement not just as a technical process but as a security imperative – a shift welcomed by Ukrainian and Moldovan elites as long overdue. An interviewee in Georgia shared that perspective: “I think we should not split the security aspect and the enlargement process, because if Ukraine falls apart, we could forget about the whole enlargement...” (GE.8, Interview with public servant in Georgia, 2025).

The changed security context has influenced how elites in the candidate countries perceive the strategic importance of enlargement and their own role in the EU’s defence. Framing enlargement through the lens of security, elites in candidate countries, in particular in Ukraine, highlight how they could contribute to the EU’s own collective defence building and stability. As an interviewee

in Ukraine put it, “we need to focus on the fact that Ukraine can strengthen the European Union in military terms with its knowledge, experience, skills, strategies, and knowledge exchange, especially right now” (UA.7, Interview with NGO representative in Ukraine, 2025).

CONCLUSIONS: THE TRILEMMA OF ENLARGEMENT: MERIT, GEOPOLITICS AND INTEGRATION

Interviews conducted as part of the Geo-Power-EU project point to a persistent trilemma at the heart of EU enlargement. The enlargement “trilemma” means that the EU must balance three often competing objectives: the respect of the principle of merit-based accession, geopolitical interests, and the deepening of integration itself. Achieving all three simultaneously proves challenging, as progress in one objective can hinder progress in another, making policy makers to prioritize two out of the three goals. As the European Union weighs expansion to include the Western Balkans and eastern neighbours like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, it must navigate a strategic tension: **how to reconcile the principle of merit-based accession with geopolitical urgency, without undermining the deepening and cohesion of integration itself.** How is the trilemma of enlargement framed?

Balancing merit-based accession and integration priorities: Merit-based accession (merit-based widening) ensures that new members of the EU are well-prepared to join the Union, strengthening its internal cohesion. However, it can also slow down the overall integration process (deepening). Conversely, deepening integration can lead to greater efficiency and unity but may also face resistance from member states and create barriers for aspiring members. Balancing both will lead to a credible and efficient EU but it might also lead to an inward-looking EU that defers enlargement and misses geopolitical opportunities, undermining its global positioning.

Balancing geopolitics and integration priorities: Balancing geopolitical priorities and deepening the EU is a complex scenario. Prioritizing a geopolitical enlargement can enhance the EU’s strategic autonomy and global standing, but it may lead to new members not being able to fully meet membership obligations, divert resources and attention from internal cohesion and reforms. Deepening integration can enhance the EU’s geopolitical influence and security, but it also risks exacerbating internal divisions. Balancing both (geopolitics and integration priorities), the EU

might be led to strategic quick enlargement, differentiated types of EU integration, and compromising on EU values and norms.

Balancing merit-based accession with geopolitics: Balancing merit-based accession with the EU's geopolitical priorities is the most often discussed policy option which presents both advantages and disadvantages. A merit-based accession ensures that new members strengthen the EU's cohesion and values, but it may defer enlargement. A strong geopolitical focus of enlargement can lead to faster accession of strategic partners but may also involve compromising on strict adherence to standards. Balancing merit-based accession with geopolitics will lead to a credible enlargement that addresses geopolitical challenges and enhances EU's global standing, but it may derail policy priorities from “deepening” to “widening”, delaying the deepening of the EU and leading to institutional overstretch.

How the above-described balancing acts are perceived by key actors, elites, in the EU and the candidate countries has been explored throughout this report. On the one hand, elite interviews underscored broad support for upholding the EU's foundational principles – democratic reforms, the rule of law, and economic and institutional readiness – as the cornerstone of enlargement. Many respondents stressed that in an era of competing governance models, the EU must stand firmly by its values. Compromising on merit, they argue, risks undermining both the sustainability of reforms in candidate countries and the legitimacy of the accession process itself. At the same time, when merit is instrumentalised to serve political aims, the credibility of enlargement suffers, fueling disillusionment and disengagement. On the other hand, strict adherence to the Copenhagen criteria and the revised enlargement methodology may result in slow, incremental progress, risking disillusionment in candidate countries. A rigid focus on technicalities could render enlargement increasingly disconnected from the geopolitical and security imperatives emerging at the EU's borders.

Elites in both the EU and candidate countries increasingly view strategic and security interests as imperatives that must be factored into the enlargement process, even if geopolitics has always, in some form, been present. Enlargement is now widely perceived as a geopolitical instrument to project EU influence, promote regional stability, and counter rival powers, particularly in response to Russian aggression, but also growing Chinese influence. While candidate countries, especially

those affected by war or state contestation, generally favour a more geopolitical EU, there is broad recognition that this must not come at the expense of fundamental reforms and principles. Compromising on these risks creates semi-integrated members, undermining the EU’s long-term functionality, institutional cohesion, and ultimately, the value system on which the Union is founded.

EU elites express greater concern about the Union’s own readiness to absorb new members, emphasising the need for internal reforms to enhance integration capacity and institutional resilience. Geopolitical pressures are recognised but also seen as potentially driving the EU beyond its limits, risking institutional overload. In particular, fast-tracked or expedited accessions are viewed as liable to strain the EU’s institutions, resources, and policy frameworks, potentially leading to fragmentation or even institutional paralysis.

Table 6: The Enlargement Trilemma

Options	Positives	Shortcomings
Merit & Integration	Efficient and credible EU	Missed geopolitical opportunities, deferred enlargement
Geopolitics & Integration	Quick strategic expansion	Sacrifice on EU values (rule of law and democratic standards)
Merit & Geopolitics	Credible enlargement with fragile countries	Institutional overstretch and internal divisions

In that respect, a common thread emerging from the interviews is that, to preserve the credibility of its enlargement policy, the EU must navigate this strategic trilemma by balancing its long-term integration objectives with today’s urgent geopolitical realities, without abandoning its foundational values.

REFERENCES

- Bieber, F. 2018. The rise (and fall) of Balkan stabilitocracies. *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 10: 176-185.
- Chaban, N. 2019. Perceptions, Expectations, Motivations: Evolution of Canadian Views on the EU. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 11(3): 45–62.
- European Commission. 2015. Analysis of the Perception of the EU and of EU's Policies Abroad, Brussels. Available at: https://fpi.ec.europa.eu/stories/analysis-perception-eu-and-eus-policies-abroad_en.
- Hill, Ch. 1993. The Capability-Expectations Gap, or Conceptualizing Europe's International Role, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 31(3): 305-328.
- Ker-Lindsay, J., I. Armakolas, R. Balfour, C. Stratulat. 2017. The national politics of EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17 (4): 511-522.
- Lucarelli, S. and L. Fioramonti (eds.). 2010. *External Perceptions of the European Union as a Global Actor* (London and New York: Routledge).
- MD Interview Report. 2025. Report for Elite Interviews in Moldova, Internal Report of Geo-Power-EU project, (unpublished) (Chisinau: IDIS).
- MK Interview Report. 2025. Report for Elite Interviews in North Macedonia, Internal Report of Geo-Power-EU project, (unpublished) (Skopje: IDSCS).
- Uvalić, M. (ed.). 2023. *Integrating the Western Balkans into the EU: New perspectives on South-East Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan).

LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Albania

- AL.1, Interview with a policy maker, Tirana, 17 February 2025
- AL.2, Interview with a civil society representative, Tirana, 18 February 2025
- AL.3, Interview with a business sector representative, Tirana, 18 February 2025

AL.4, Interview with a civil society representative, Tirana, 18 February 2025
AL.5, Interview with an academic expert, online, 1 March 2025
AL.6, Interview with a journalist, online, 17 March 2025
AL.7, Interview with a Regional Organization representative, online, 18 March 2025

Bosnia and Herzegovina

BA.1, Interview with business person, Sarajevo, 7 February 2025
BA.2, Interview with NGO representative, Sarajevo, 10 February 2025
BA.3, Interview with academic expert, Sarajevo, 11 February 2025
BA.4, Interview with NGO representative, Sarajevo, 7 February 2025
BA.6, Interview with journalist, Sarajevo, 18 February 2025
BA.7, Interview with politician, Visoko, 17 February 2025
BA.8, Interview with politician, Sarajevo, 10 February 2025
BA.9, Interview with politician, Sarajevo, 10 February 2025
BA.10, Interview with NGO representative, Sarajevo, 18 February 2025
BA.11, Interview with politician, Maglaj, 12 February 2025
BA.12, Interview with NGO activist, Sarajevo, 17 February 2025
BA.13, Interview with journalist, Sarajevo, 12 February 2025

Georgia

GE.1, Interview with expert – civil society representative, online, 26 February 2025
GE.2, Georgia, Interview with former policy maker, Tbilisi, 16 May, 2025
GE.3, Interview with expert-policy advisor, online, 24 March 2025
GE.4, Interview with policy maker, online, Tbilisi, 27 February 2025
GE.5, Interview with business person, online, 28 February 2025
GE.6, Interview with diplomat, online, 28 February 2025
GE.7, Interview with business person, Tbilisi, 3 March 2025
GE.8, Interview with public servant, Tbilisi, 4 March 2025
GE.9, Interview with diplomat, Tbilisi, 17 March 2025
GE.10, Interview with NGO representative, online, 20 March 2025

GE.11, Interview with academic, online, 26 March 2025

Kosovo

Ko.1, Interview with a policy maker, Pristina, 16 January 2025

Ko.2, Interview with a policy maker, Pristina, 15 January 2025

Ko.3, Interview with a policy maker, Pristina, 15 January 2025

Ko.4, Interview with a civil society representative, Pristina, 15 January 2025

Ko.5, Interview with a civil society representative, Pristina, 16 January 2025

Ko.6, Interview with a civil society representative, Pristina, 17 January 2025

Ko.7, Interview with a civil society representative, online, 4 February 2025

Ko.8, Interview with a journalist, online, 5 February 2025

Ko.9, Interview with a journalist, online, 7 February 2025

Moldova

MD.1, Interview with policy maker, Chisinau, 4 February 2025

MD.2, Interview with diplomat, Ambassador, online, 29 January 2025

MD.3, Interview with journalist, Chisinau, 16 February 2025

MD.4, Interview NGO representative, Chisinau, 6 February 2025

MD.5, Interview with policy maker, Chisinau, 18 February 2025

MD.6, Interview with policy maker, Chisinau 19 February 2025

MD.7, Interview with expert / analyst, Chisinau, 4 February 2025

MD.8, Interview with private sector representative, Chisinau, 19 February 2025

Montenegro

MN.1, Interview with policy maker, online, 9 February 2025

MN.2, Interview with mayor and former policy maker, Montenegro, 16 February 2025

MN.3, Interview with a banker-representative of the Central Bank, Montenegro, 17 February 2025

MN.4, Interview with a diplomat, online, 12 March 2025

MN.5, Interview with a former high-level official at the MFA, Montenegro, 20 February 2025

MN.6, Interview with a former high-level official at the MFA, online, 20 March 2025
MN.7, Interview with NGO representative, Montenegro, 23 February 2025
MN.8, Interview with analyst, online, 3 March 2025

North Macedonia

MK.1, Interview with policy maker, online, 13 March 2025
MK.2, Interview with policy maker, online, 12 March 2025
MK.3, Interview with journalist, online, 15 March 2025
MK.4, Interview with NGO representative, online, 3 March 2025
MK.5, Interview with academic, online, 12 March 2025
MK.6, Interview with journalist, online, 6 March 2025
MK.7, Interview with NGO representative, online, 7 March 2025
MK.8, Interview with diplomat from North Macedonia, online, 8 March 2025
MK.9, Interview with academic, online, 5 March 2025
MK.10, Interview with academic, online, 10 March 2025

Serbia

SE.1, Interview with senior policy maker, Belgrade 13 February 2025
SE.2, Interview with expert and think tanker, Belgrade, 21 February 2025
SE.3, Interview with expert and think tanker, Belgrade, 17 February 2025
SE.4, Interview with expert and opposition figure, Belgrade, 18 February 2025
SE.5, Interview with opposition leader, Belgrade, 19 March 2025
SE.6, Interview with journalist, Belgrade, 12 March 2025
SE.7, Interview with former diplomat and opposition figure, Belgrade, 7 February 2025
SE.8, Interview with Serbia's diplomat posted in Brussels, Belgrade, 11 February 2025
SE.9, Interview with a former advisor to the Minister of European Integration, 2 April 2025
SE.10, Interview with a leader of an NGOs, Belgrade, 12 February 2025

Ukraine

UA.1, Interview with political analyst, online, 10 February 2025
UA.2, Interview with political analyst, online, 31 January 2025

UA.3, Interview with policy maker, online, 20 February 2025
UA.4, Interview with editor, online, 14 March 2025
UA.5, Interview with NGO representative, online, 24 March 2025
UA.6, Interview with civil society representative, online, 21 February 2025
UA.7, Interview with civil society representative, online, 26 February 2025
UA.8, Interview with journalist, online, 26 February 2025
UA.9, Interview with businessman, online, 20 February 2025

European Union Institutions and Member States

EU.1, Interview with EU diplomat, online, 11 February 2025
EU.2, Interview with political advisor in the European Parliament, online, 13 March 2025
EU.3, Interview with former Vice-President of the European Parliament, online, 14 May 2025
EU.4, Interview with an official from the European Commission, online, 4th April 2025
EU.5, Interview with EU officer, Brussels, 18 March 2025
EU.6, Interview with an official from the European Commission, online, 14th March 2025
EU.7, Interview with policy maker, Vienna, 7 March 2025
EU.8, Interview with policy maker, Vienna, 7 March 2025
EU.9, Interview the policy maker, Athens, 12 June 2025
EU.10, Interview with a member of the National Parliament in Greece, Athens, 10 June 2025
EU.11, Interview with officer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, online, 15 April 2025
EU.12, Interview with EU diplomat, online, 14 April 2025
EU.13, Interview with expert, online, 22 May 2025
EU.14, Interview with Italian expert, online, 26 March 2025
EU.15, Interview with analyst, online, 20 March 2025
EU.16, Interview with EU diplomat, online, 1 April 2025
EU.17, Interview with EU parliament advisor, Brussels, 17 March 2025
EU.18, Interview with EEAS representative, Brussels, 17 March 2025
EU.19, Interview with EC official, 19 March 2025
EU.20, Interview with a member of the European Parliament, Brussels, 19 March 2025
EU.21, Interview with officer at a European institution, Brussels, 17 March 2025

EU.22, Interview with officer in an MFA, 16 June 2025

EU.23, Interview with private sector representative in EU M/S, Vienna, 11 March 2025

EU.24, Interview with officer at the EEAS, Brussels, 17 March 2025

Regional Organizations

BA.5, Interview with representative of a Regional Organization, Sarajevo, 12 February 2025