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Reader: EU Enlargement 2035

Preparatory Reading for the Policy Game "EU Resilience in 2035"

Please read before the first session[1]

1. Developments in EU Enlargement Policy

After the big EU enlargement round of 2004 and the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, only Croatia joined in 2013. After that, the process stagnated. With Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022, this changed abruptly. Within a short time, Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia were granted candidate status, and several heads of state or government named 2030 as the target date for the next round of enlargement.

Enlargement policy since the establishment of the Copenhagen criteria of 1993 can be divided into three phases: the **big bang enlargement** up to 2004, the **protracted enlargement** between 2005 and 2021, and the **geopolitical enlargement process** since 2022. What distinguishes the phases are three sets of factors – the domestic situation within the EU itself, the progress of transformation in the aspiring countries, and the geopolitical context.

The decisive point for our game: in the current phase, a **geopolitical logic** in enlargement accompanies the **logic of modernisation** on which the Copenhagen criteria are based. The geopolitical logic aspires to speed, to not risk increasing the influence of other powerful players such as Russia and China in the region. The other wants thoroughness, because unfinished accessions can cause problems in the future – Hungary and Poland are regularly cited as evidence. The two logics do not exclude each other, but they collide over pace. Everything you will decide in the game takes place within this tension.

2. The Three Drivers

The InvigoratEU project identified three drivers as important and foreseeable in their development and consequences for enlargement and resilience in the EU.

[1] For explanations on central concepts, see the InvigoratEU glossary at https://zenodo.org/records/17224960.

Driver 1: European Security Environment

The most consequential driver, with four sub-elements.

The War in Ukraine. The outcome is open and ranges from a short-term ceasefire and a peace settlement forced by the United States to a continued stalemate or the victory of one side. The direction of its effect on enlargement is not clear-cut: a peace settlement would tend to reduce the political impetus for enlargement, while accelerated accession is currently being discussed as a possible instrument to end the war.

Conflicts with Third Countries. None of the Association Trio countries (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) controls its entire territory: Ukraine is at war with Russia, Georgia has no control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Russian troops are stationed in Transnistria. This raises unresolved legal questions – can a state with an unresolved territorial conflict join? And what would the mutual assistance clause of Article 42(7) TEU mean in that case, which obliges member states to assist a member under attack "by all the means in their power".

Security and Defence Partnerships. Brexit, Donald Trump's second term, the NATO accession of Finland and Sweden and Turkey's regional ambitions are reshaping the European security architecture. Since 2023, candidate countries must fully align with the Common Foreign and Security Policy, including sanctions. The degree of this alignment varies widely.

Deterrence and Resilience. The EU has shifted its political priority from civilian measures to defense policy. Whether this produces a capable military actor depends on political will, money, technological innovation, industrial capacities and military reforms. Concerning critical infrastructure, EU policy is currently shifting from protection to resilience.

Driver 2: Bilateral Disputes and Regional Cooperation

Every member state has several veto points in the accession procedure. This turns bilateral conflicts between Member States and candidate countries into gatekeeper issues that must be resolved politically – otherwise a single dispute can hold the entire process hostage, even for uninvolved countries.

North Macedonia was held up by veto threats from Greece and Bulgaria; the Prespa Agreement of 2018 resolved the dispute with Athens, while the differences with Sofia persist. Albania faces a threat of a Greek veto, most recently over maritime borders and the treatment of the Greek minority. Ukraine has tensions with Hungary over minority rights, and in 2025 the winner of the first round of the Romanian presidential election laid claim to territories in Ukraine and Moldova.

Between candidate countries, reconciliation is progressing slowly, especially regarding the 2013 Brussels Agreement between Kosovo and Serbia. Kosovo submitted an application for membership in 2020 but cannot be granted candidate status because five member states do not recognise its independence. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, secessionist ambitions of Republika Srpska hamper the state's capacity to act.

Driver 3: Public Opinion

All member states must ratify accession treaties in accordance with their constitutional rules, either by parliament or by referendum. This makes public opinion a hard constraint rather than mere background mood.

The figures are ambivalent. The Special Eurobarometer of 2025 found 56 percent support for further enlargement, with 38 percent opposed (see Figure 1). In 23 member states at least half of the respondents support enlargement, whereas in France, Czechia and Austria support is a minority position. At the same time, enlargement ranked fourteenth out of fourteen possible priorities in the EP survey of autumn 2025, and support for neighboring and candidate countries is EU citizens' lowest budget priority.

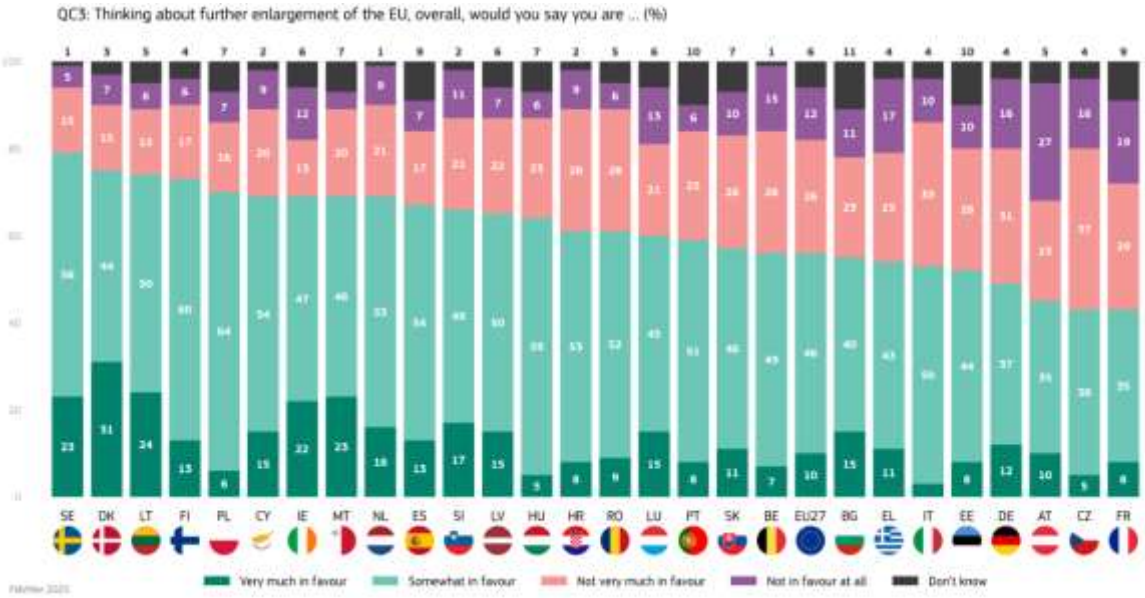


Figure 1. Source: Special Eurobarometer 2025

In the candidate countries, patience is running out. In Serbia and North Macedonia, around a third believe that accession will never happen. In Ukraine, hope of joining within ten years fell from 75 percent in 2022 to 52 percent in 2025 – and Ukrainians surveyed see the biggest obstacle, apart from the war, not in their own country but in the EU: in the positions of individual member states and in the Brussels bureaucracy.

3. The Two Visions for 2035

In foresight methodology, a vision is not a forecast but the normative description of a conceivable future that is meant to motivate political action. The InvigoratEU project developed two such visions. 2035 was chosen as the horizon because ten years are far enough away to think about structural change and close enough to remain relevant for today's decisions.

While reading, pay attention to which instruments are available in each world. This is the information you will need in the game.

Vision I: Resilient Union 2035

Enlargement took place in two waves. **Montenegro and Moldova are full members by 2035** – two small countries whose admission was institutionally easy to absorb and which restored credibility to the process. Ukraine is undergoing a staged accession that takes account of its reconstruction needs and its size. Georgia's process has been resumed. Albania and North Macedonia are on their way to full membership; their bilateral disputes were **resolved through enhanced EU mediation**. Serbia's accession remains tied to normalisation with Kosovo. Bosnia and Herzegovina is on a slower, differentiated track. Kosovo participates in several EU programmes, even before obtaining candidate status.

Institutionally decisive: the reforms took place **within the existing treaties**, without a new treaty that would have had to be ratified and would therefore have been vulnerable to vetoes. They include the move to qualified majority voting in the intermediate stages of enlargement, the extension of qualified majority voting in foreign and security policy to reduce vetoes, and a restructuring of the EU budget, mainly through exception rules for new members.

Security is the driver of this vision. Ukraine becomes a contributor to European security, not merely a recipient. Potential new member states are both at the same time. Geopolitical pressure enabled stabilisation rather than full conflict resolution; it remains open how durable the compromises reached are. And because security became the main driver, **democratic conditionality is applied less strictly than in previous rounds**. The preferred vision therefore comes at a price.


ENLARGEMENT IN TWO WAVES
AROUND 2030
First wave of accession
MONTENEGRO
MOLDOVA
Restoring credibility.
Building momentum.
AROUND 2035
Second wave of accession
Further enlargement across the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership
DIFFERENTIATED & STAGED INTEGRATION
Full membership for frontrunners. Participation in EU programs for those not yet ready.
Driving reforms and building momentum across the region.
Temporary waivers and flexibilities to speed up the process.
VISION I
RESILIENT UNION 2035
A STRATEGICALLY INTEGRATED AND GEOPOLITICALLY DRIVEN ENLARGEMENT
SECURITY
STABILITY
INFLUENCE
SECURITY AS THE KEY DRIVER
Protecting the Union and its neighbourhood
Ukraine as a key security contributor to the EU
New members as both recipients and contributors of security
GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT
Responding to instability, the threat from Russia and a weaker NATO.
Enlargement as a strategic investment in stability and global standing.
Solving territorial disputes as a precondition for further enlargement. The EU as an active mediator and leverage.
INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS
A FIT-FOR-PURPOSE UNION
Extension of QMV to reduce vetoes and enhance decision-making.
EU budget restructured with exception rules for new members.
Streamlined governance to function effectively in a larger Union.
Reforms within existing treaties, using differentiated integration to build consensus.
REFORM & RESILIENCE
INDIRECT BUT POWERFUL IMPACT
Momentum from frontrunners accelerates democratic reforms.
Participation in EU programs drives standards and capacity.
Renewed confidence in the enlargement process.
STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION
SHOWCASING BENEFITS
Economic growth.
Access to resources, raw materials & energy.
Enhanced geopolitical stability.
Highlighting mutual benefits for EU citizens and partners.
STRONGER TOGETHER. BUILDING OUR COMMON FUTURE.
A RESILIENT UNION IN 2035
Stronger, safer and more influential EU.
A neighbourhood anchored in stability and cooperation.
A united Europe ready to shape the future.
ENLARGEMENT AS A GEOPOLITICAL IMPERATIVE.
REFORMS FOR A STRONGER UNION.
TOGETHER FOR A SECURE AND PROSPEROUS EUROPE.

Vision II: Stagnating Union 2035

By 2035, not a single round of enlargement has been concluded. Montenegro, despite far-advanced negotiations, is stuck due to internal EU disagreements. Moldova's accession is controversial because of Transnistria. Ukraine's accession has been postponed indefinitely, Georgia's candidate status is frozen. North Macedonia and Albania are at a standstill because of bilateral disputes and vetoes. Bosnia and Herzegovina's status was frozen after secessionist pressure. Kosovo never obtained candidate status.

Internal division, reinforced by continued support for Eurosceptic parties, prevented reforms. **Veto power is systematically used to enforce national interests.** The Union no longer appears as a credible mediator and therefore has no leverage in bilateral conflicts. Republika Srpska steps up its challenge to state institutions, and violent incidents between Serbia and Kosovo become more frequent; normalisation is no longer on the agenda.

Enlargement has become a technical, apolitical exercise because political compromises are not reached. Without strong incentives, reforms remain superficial, and clientelist networks and state capture persist. Trust in the EU reaches historic lows in the candidate countries, as does support for enlargement within the Union.

Important for the game: even in this world, the EU is not incapable of acting. Money continues to flow, bilateral partnerships exist, coalitions of individual member states can act. What is missing is joint, binding and credible action. Your task will not be to explain that nothing works – but to work out who acts under these conditions, with what legitimacy, and at what cost.


NO ENLARGEMENT BY 2035
No new members.
All accession processes remain stalled.
Internal divisions and vetoes block progress and reforms.
Bilateral disputes remain unresolved, undermining regional cooperation.
Lack of political will and credible action.
Frustration and loss of trust across candidate countries.
ENLARGEMENT STALLED
VISION II
STAGNATING UNION 2035
A FRAGMENTED AND STALLED ENLARGEMENT WITH LOST STRATEGIC DIRECTION
DIVIDED UNION
VETOES & NATIONAL INTERESTS
UNRESOLVED DISPUTES
LOST CREDIBILITY & INFLUENCE
EU (Current Members)
Candidate countries
No enlargement by 2035
INTERNAL DIVISIONS BLOCK PROGRESS
Eurosceptic parties gain ground, reforms are blocked.
Systematic abuse of veto power serves narrow national interests.
The EU remains ill-prepared and enlargement is unmanageable.
STOP
RECORD LOW TRUST
IN CANDIDATE COUNTRIES
Growing frustration and declining pro-EU sentiment.
WITHIN THE UNION
Public support for enlargement at historic lows.
UNRESOLVED DISPUTES, LOST LEVERAGE
Territorial and bilateral disputes remain unresolved.
Lack of regional cooperation and reconciliation.
The EU fails to act as an effective mediator.
Vetoes used to protect allies and national interests.
CREDIBILITY LOST, REFORMS STALLED
WE WERE PROMISED A FUTURE.
NOTHING HAS CHANGED.
Enlargement reduced to a technical, non-political exercise.
Weak incentives and superficial compliance with the acquis.
Clientelism, state capture and entrenched elites persist.
Pro-European sentiment continues to decline.
INSECURE NEIGHBOURHOOD, WEAK EU RESPONSE
Persistent instability fuels external interference.
EU lacks a strong geopolitical posture and strategic unity.
Divisions over geopolitical priorities slow decision-making.
Enlargement loses political priority and strategic focus.
A POLITICISED AND INEFFECTIVE PROCESS
Enlargement becomes a political battleground.
Promises broken, expectations betrayed.
Record low support on both sides.
Once a pillar of European integration, now stalled.
EU ACCESSION ROAD CLOSED NO PROGRESS
A UNION DIVIDED. A NEIGHBOURHOOD UNSTABLE. A FUTURE PUT ON HOLD.
ENLARGEMENT STALLED. OPPORTUNITIES LOST.

5. Glossary

Term	Meaning
Acquis communautaire	the complete body of EU law that acceding countries must adopt
Association Trio	Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia
Mutual assistance clause, Art. 42(7) TEU	obligation to assist a member in case of armed aggression
Brussels Agreement 2013	normalisation agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, only partially implemented
Differentiated integration	participation in individual EU policies without full membership
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy, mostly decided unanimously
Conditionality	linking EU benefits to demonstrated reform progress
Copenhagen criteria	accession conditions of 1993: democracy and rule of law, functioning market economy, ability to take on the obligations of membership
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework, the EU budget cycle; currently being negotiated for 2028–2034
Passerelle clause	procedure to switch from unanimity to qualified majority in certain areas without amending the treaties, but requires unanimity
QMV	qualified majority voting in the Council: 55 percent of member states representing 65 percent of the population
Enhanced cooperation, Art. 20 TEU	at least nine member states deepen cooperation without the others
Veto point	procedural step at which a single member state can halt the process

6. Your Preparatory Task

Before the first session, answer the following question in writing in about five sentences:

> *Which of the three drivers will, in your assessment, have the greatest influence on EU enlargement by 2035 – and why? Name one concrete mechanism through which this driver operates.*

Your answer will not be graded, but it will open the first session.

7. Further Reading

Burguete, Víctor / Ventura, Elena (2026): *Reimagining Enlargement: Visions for EU Policy towards the Western Balkans and the Association Trio*. InvigoratEU D9.1. Especially chapter 4.
https://zenodo.org/records/21335124

Schimmelfennig, Frank / Kakhishvili, Levan (2026): *Report on EU's Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Toolbox*. InvigoratEU D3.3.
https://zenodo.org/records/17340364

European Commission (2025): *Special Eurobarometer 564 – Attitudes towards EU Enlargement*.