

## European Union Enlargement - Focus on Eastern Europe

### ევროკავშირის გაფართოება - აქცენტი აღმოსავლეთ ევროპაზე

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Rainer Wehner<sup>1a</sup>

რაინერ ვენერი<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Technical University of Applied Sciences Würzburg-Schweinfurt, Germany

<sup>1</sup> ვიურცბურგ-შვაინფურტის გამოყენებით მეცნიერებათა ტექნიკური უნივერსიტეტი, გერმანია

\* Rainer.Wehner@thws.de

### Abstract

**Background:** European Union (EU) enlargement remains a contested and evolving policy domain, increasingly shaped by geopolitical imperatives, democratic governance challenges, and institutional constraints. The introduction of the revised enlargement methodology in 2020 and the geopolitical transformations following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have significantly reshaped accession priorities and processes. This study examines contemporary EU enlargement practices and identifies the principal political, institutional, and geopolitical challenges affecting the accession process, with particular emphasis on the revised enlargement methodology and post-2022 developments. **Methods:** The study draws on an analysis of the relevant academic literature, EU policy frameworks, and institutional developments concerning enlargement conditionality, accession negotiations, democratic reforms, and the EU's institutional capacity. Particular attention is given to the Western Balkans and Georgia within the broader context of EU enlargement policy. **Results:** The analysis identifies the \*fundamentals-first\* principle and gradual integration mechanisms as central features of contemporary EU enlargement policy. These approaches emphasize the rule of law, anti-corruption measures, democratic governance, and measurable reform benchmarks. Nevertheless, democratic backsliding, state capture, and inconsistent reform implementation in candidate countries continue to undermine the credibility and effectiveness of EU conditionality. Bilateral disputes and the capacity of individual member states to obstruct accession negotiations further complicate the process. Russia's war against Ukraine has increased the geopolitical urgency of enlargement while exposing persistent limitations in the EU's institutional preparedness, decision-making mechanisms, and capacity to integrate new members. These developments reveal a fundamental tension between accelerating accession and ensuring substantive compliance with EU democratic and institutional standards. **Conclusions:** Effective and sustainable EU enlargement requires a balanced approach that combines credible accession incentives, consistent and merit-based conditionality, and institutional reforms within the European Union. Strengthening decision-making procedures, addressing budgetary constraints, and ensuring substantive democratic reforms in candidate countries are essential for maintaining the credibility and effectiveness of enlargement policy. Without parallel institutional adaptation and coherent political commitments, the EU risks undermining the legitimacy of the accession process, increasing uncertainty among candidate countries, and weakening its normative authority and geopolitical influence.

**Keywords:** EU Enlargement; Geopolitical Influence; Strategic Autonomy; Institutional Reform; Multipolar International Order



## აბსტრაქტი

**შესავალი:** ევროკავშირის გაფართოება კვლავ რჩება წინააღმდეგობრივ და მუდმივად განვითარებად პოლიტიკურ პროცესად, რომელზეც მნიშვნელოვან გავლენას ახდენს გეოპოლიტიკური გამოწვევები, დემოკრატიული მმართველობის პრობლემები და ინსტიტუციური შეზღუდვები. 2020 წელს ევროკავშირის გაფართოების განახლებული მეთოდოლოგიის შემოღებამ და 2022 წელს რუსეთის მიერ უკრაინაში სრულმასშტაბიანი ომის დაწყების შემდეგ განვითარებულმა გეოპოლიტიკურმა ცვლილებებმა მნიშვნელოვნად შეცვალა ევროკავშირში გაწევრების პროცესის პრიორიტეტები და პოლიტიკური კონტექსტი. კვლევის მიზანია ევროკავშირის გაფართოების თანამედროვე პრაქტიკის შესწავლა და გაწევრების პროცესთან დაკავშირებული ძირითადი პოლიტიკური, ინსტიტუციური და გეოპოლიტიკური გამოწვევების გამოვლენა, განსაკუთრებული ყურადღების გამახვილებით 2020 წლის განახლებულ მეთოდოლოგიასა და 2022 წლის შემდგომ განვითარებულ მოვლენებზე. **კვლევის მეთოდები:** კვლევა ეფუძნება შესაბამისი სამეცნიერო ლიტერატურის, ევროკავშირის პოლიტიკის დოკუმენტებისა და გაფართოების პროცესთან დაკავშირებული ინსტიტუციური ცვლილებების ანალიზს. განხილულია ევროკავშირში გაწევრების წინაპირობები, წევრობის მოლაპარაკებების მექანიზმები, დემოკრატიული რეფორმების განხორციელება და ევროკავშირის ინსტიტუციური შესაძლებლობები. განსაკუთრებული ყურადღება ეთმობა დასავლეთ ბალკანეთის ქვეყნებსა და საქართველოს ევროკავშირის გაფართოების პოლიტიკის ფართო კონტექსტში. **კვლევის შედეგები:** ანალიზმა გამოავლინა, რომ ევროკავშირის გაფართოების თანამედროვე პოლიტიკის ძირითად მექანიზმებს წარმოადგენს „ფუნდამენტური პრინციპების პრიორიტეტულობის“ (fundamentals first) მიდგომა და ევროკავშირის პოლიტიკებსა და ინსტიტუციურ მექანიზმებში კანდიდატი ქვეყნების ეტაპობრივი ინტეგრაცია. აღნიშნული მიდგომები განსაკუთრებულ მნიშვნელობას ანიჭებს კანონის უზენაესობის განმტკიცებას, კორუფციის წინააღმდეგ ბრძოლას, დემოკრატიული მმართველობის გაუმჯობესებასა და რეფორმების შესრულების გაზომვადი კრიტერიუმებით შეფასებას. მიუხედავად ამისა, კანდიდატ ქვეყნებში დემოკრატიული უკუსვლა, სახელმწიფო ინსტიტუტების არაფორმალური გავლენების ქვეშ მოქცევა და რეფორმების არათანმიმდევრული განხორციელება ამცირებს ევროკავშირის პირობითობის პოლიტიკის ეფექტიანობასა და სანდოობას. გაწევრების პროცესს დამატებით აფერხებს ორმხრივი პოლიტიკური დავები და ევროკავშირის ცალკეული წევრი სახელმწიფოების მიერ გადაწყვეტილებების დაბლოკვის შესაძლებლობა. რუსეთის მიერ უკრაინის წინააღმდეგ წარმოებულმა ომმა გააძლიერა ევროკავშირის გაფართოების გეოპოლიტიკური მნიშვნელობა, თუმცა ამავედროულად გამოავლინა ევროკავშირის ინსტიტუციური მზაობის, გადაწყვეტილებების მიღების მექანიზმებისა და ახალი წევრების ინტეგრაციის შესაძლებლობების შეზღუდვები. შედეგად, გამოიკვეთა არსებითი წინააღმდეგობა გაწევრების პროცესის დაჩქარების გეოპოლიტიკურ აუცილებლობასა და კანდიდატი ქვეყნების მიერ ევროკავშირის დემოკრატიული და ინსტიტუციური სტანდარტების რეალური შესრულების მოთხოვნას შორის. **დასკვნა:** ევროკავშირის ეფექტიანი და მდგრადი გაფართოება მოითხოვს დაბალანსებულ მიდგომას, რომელიც აერთიანებს გაწევრების რეალისტურ და სანდო პერსპექტივას, მკაფიო და დამსახურებაზე დაფუძნებულ პირობითობასა და თავად ევროკავშირის შიდა ინსტიტუციურ რეფორმებს. გადაწყვეტილებების მიღების მექანიზმების გაუმჯობესება, საბიუჯეტო შეზღუდვების გათვალისწინება და კანდიდატ ქვეყნებში არსებითი დემოკრატიული გარდაქმნების უზრუნველყოფა აუცილებელია გაფართოების პოლიტიკის ეფექტიანობისა და ლეგიტიმურობის შესანარჩუნებლად. ევროკავშირის ინსტიტუციური ადაპტაციისა და თანმიმდევრული პოლიტიკური ვალდებულებების გარეშე იზრდება გაწევრების პროცესის სანდოობის შესუსტების, კანდიდატ ქვეყნებში გაურკვევლობის გაღრმავებისა და ევროკავშირის ნორმატიული ავტორიტეტისა და გეოპოლიტიკური გავლენის შემცირების რისკი.

**საკვანძო სიტყვები:** ევროკავშირის გაფართოება; ევროკავშირში გაწევრება; გაფართოების პოლიტიკა; ევროკავშირის პირობითობის პრინციპი; დემოკრატიული უკუსვლა; დასავლეთ ბალკანეთი; საქართველო; გეოპოლიტიკური გამოწვევები.

## 1. Introduction

European Union (EU) enlargement has re-emerged as one of the most consequential and closely watched policy areas after a decade in which the process was widely described as suffering from "enlargement fatigue," with several Western Balkan candidates experiencing years of stagnation despite holding formal candidate status (Centre for European Reform, 2025). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 abruptly reversed this trajectory. Within days, Ukraine and Moldova submitted membership applications, and both were granted candidate status by June 2022, a unique velocity in the history of EU accession (Schwarz, 2025). Georgia followed a similar path toward candidacy in December 2023. What had largely been a technocratic, criteria-driven process began to be reframed by EU leaders and institutions in explicitly geopolitical terms, described in Council communications as a strategic choice essential to the Union's own security and stability (Council of the European Union, 2026).

This revitalisation of the political process however, runs up against two structural features of the accession process that have not fundamentally changed. The first is the EU's insistence on rigorous, benchmark-based conditionality. The 2020 revision of the enlargement methodology placed the rule of law, anti-corruption reform, and the quality of democratic institutions at the centre of negotiations through the so-called "fundamentals first" approach, while also introducing "phasing-in" mechanisms that allow candidates earlier, partial integration into EU policies and funding programmes (European Commission, 2020). The second is the EU's own, largely unresolved, institutional capacity to absorb new members. Enlargement encompassing Ukraine, Moldova, the Western Balkan states, and potentially Georgia would expand the Union to more than thirty members, intensifying long-standing concerns about decision-making paralysis under the principle of unanimity - that still governs foreign policy, sanctions, and accession itself (Centre for European Reform, 2025; Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2022).

This paper examines how these two dynamics, accelerated geopolitical urgency on the one hand and durable institutional and normative constraints on the other, interact in contemporary EU enlargement practice, with particular attention to the Eastern European candidates Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. It asks to what extent the post-2022 political re-energization of enlargement has been matched by substantive progress in the accession process itself, and what risks arise where political ambition and procedural reality diverge.

The paper's central argument is that enlargement toward Eastern Europe today is marked by a widening gap between political rhetoric and the practical, benchmark-driven substance of accession. Ukraine and Moldova illustrate both the possibilities and the limits of accelerated accession. Both moved from candidate status in 2022 to the formal opening of the first negotiating cluster in June 2026, yet even this comparatively fast timeline required years of internal EU wrangling, most visibly around a Hungarian veto that blocked the opening of talks for two years and was lifted only after the new Hungarian prime minister lifted the contentious veto in early June 2026 (Euronews, 2026;). Georgia, by contrast, illustrates the risk that geopolitical goodwill cannot substitute for genuine domestic reform. Despite being granted candidate status in December 2023 on the understanding that nine specific reform steps would be implemented, Georgia's accession process has been de facto suspended since 2024 amid what the European Commission has since described as serious and deepening democratic backsliding (European Parliament, 2025;).

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the methodological approach taken in this study and then analyses, in turn, the substance of the EU's revised enlargement methodology, the post-2022 geopolitical process, the specific challenges of domestic capture and backsliding evident in Georgia, and the unresolved question of the EU's own institutional readiness for further enlargement. Section 3 draws these strands together into a concluding assessment, and Section 4 identifies avenues for further research.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research Approach

This paper adopts a qualitative, document-based research design that combines a review of recent academic literature on the theory of EU enlargement with an analysis of primary EU policy documents, including Council conclusions, European Commission communications and enlargement reports, as well as European Parliament resolutions published between 2020 and 2026. This dual approach situates current developments in Eastern Europe within both the theoretical debate on the geopolitical challenges of an enlargement (Scicluna, 2025; Schramm, 2025) and the concrete institutional record of how the accession process has actually unfolded for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia.

Given the fast-moving nature of the subject matter, the analysis privileges the most recent enlargement reports, Council and Commission press releases, and 2025- and 2026-published academic literature, while

drawing on the Commission's original 2020 methodology communication to establish the procedural baseline against which subsequent practice is assessed. Secondary reporting from specialist EU-affairs outlets is used sparingly, and only to establish the sequencing of recent political events, such as the timing of the Hungarian veto and its lifting, that has not yet been fully processed in the academic literature. The analysis does not attempt a comprehensive case-by-case assessment of every current or aspiring candidate; rather, it focuses on Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia as illustrative cases that, taken together, capture the range of outcomes possible under the current enlargement framework, from accelerated progress to effective suspension.

## ***2.2 The 2020 Revised Enlargement Methodology and "Fundamentals First"***

The procedural architecture within which all current accession processes take place was set out in the European Commission's February 2020 revision of the enlargement methodology. The reform responded to a credibility crisis in the accession process following France's refusal in October 2019 to endorse the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania despite both countries having fulfilled the Commission's own recommendations (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2020). The Commission tries to revise the process in its own terms, like more credible, more dynamic, and more political, while placing the fundamentals of accession, namely the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions, and economic governance, at the very centre of negotiations (European Commission, 2020).

Two features of the revised methodology are particularly significant for understanding present-day practice in Eastern Europe. First, accession chapters were reorganized into six thematic clusters, of which Cluster 1, covering the fundamentals, must be opened first and closed last. This structural sequencing is intended to ensure that reforms to the judiciary, anti-corruption institutions, and public administration. They remain under active monitoring throughout the entire negotiation period (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2020). Second, the methodology introduced a principle of reversibility: a candidate's progress on other clusters can be paused, and in serious cases negotiations can be suspended altogether, if a country regresses on the fundamentals. This mechanism, initially designed with the Western Balkans in mind, has since been applied in practice to Georgia, whose accession process was effectively frozen following the Commission's assessment of continued democratic regression (European External Action Service, 2023).

The methodology also introduced "phasing-in," allowing candidates to gain earlier, partial access to specific EU policies, programmes, and funding streams before full membership is achieved, alongside a stronger role for Member States in monitoring progress through regular summits and ministerial meetings (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2020). By 2025, the Commission's enlargement communications continued to frame this fundamentals-first logic as the anchor of the entire process, stating that negotiations move forward only when candidate countries demonstrate progress on reforms and Member States, in turn, take the necessary decisions to advance talks (European Commission, 2025).

In principle, this architecture offers a coherent answer to the tension between speed and substance: it allows the EU to respond to geopolitical urgency by opening negotiations quickly, as with Ukraine and Moldova, while retaining the ability to slow or reverse the process where fundamentals are not respected, as with Georgia. In practice, however, the credibility of this system depends entirely on the EU's willingness to invoke the reversibility mechanism consistently. Furthermore, on Member States' capacity to agree on when a violation is serious enough to warrant it, both of which remain politically contested, as the following sections illustrate.

## ***2.3 Geopoliticization after 2022: Ukraine and Moldova***

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is widely treated in the literature as a critical juncture for EU enlargement policy, though scholars disagree on how far it has actually transformed the substance of the process rather than merely its political framing. Schwarz (2025) frames the question explicitly as whether the war constitutes a genuine turning point, applying historical institutionalism to a bibliometric and quantitative analysis of EU progress reports between 2013 and 2023; the study concludes that geopolitical factors have been increasingly incorporated into enlargement discourse, but that this shift does not yet amount to a definitive, structural break with the previous, criteria-driven approach. Scicluna (2025) reaches a related conclusion through a discursive analysis of Commission President von der Leyen's speeches and the electoral manifestos of European party groups, finding that the war refocused political attention on the EU enlargement after years of fatigue. This increased attention has not been matched by a comparable acceleration in concrete accession progress, and that EU political forces remain divided on how far and how fast enlargement should proceed.

The empirical record of Ukraine and Moldova's accession process illustrates this gap between political excitement and procedural substance. Both countries were granted candidate status in June 2022, only months after applying in February, and formal accession negotiations were opened in June 2024 (Schwarz, 2025). Yet

the subsequent two years saw the process stall entirely, as Hungary, under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, refused to endorse the opening of the first negotiating cluster with Ukraine, a position that also indirectly delayed Moldova's progress under the so-called "package approach" linking the two countries' dossiers (Al Jazeera, 2026). It was only after a change of government in Hungary and a bilateral agreement on the rights of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine's Transcarpathia region that the veto was lifted in June 2026, allowing Cluster 1 to be opened with both candidates (Council of the European Union, 2026). By July 2026, a sixth cluster, covering external relations, had also been opened, though four of the six clusters remained blocked, with continuing disagreement among Member States over the appropriate pace of accession relative to the longer-waiting Western Balkan candidates (Euronews, 2026).

This sequence illustrates a structural feature of the current enlargement system rather than a Ukraine- or Moldova-specific anomaly: because the opening of each cluster requires unanimous Council agreement, a single Member State can freeze the entire process for reasons that have little to do with a candidate's own fulfilment of the accession criteria. Schramm (2025), analysing European Council summit conclusions since 1961, finds that geopolitical motives concerning security, stability, and influence have consistently featured in enlargement deliberations, but that Council members have just as consistently linked their support for widening to unresolved concerns about the Union's internal functioning, a pattern that the Ukraine-Moldova case reproduces almost exactly.

#### ***2.4 Domestic Capture and Backsliding: The Case of Georgia***

Where Ukraine and Moldova illustrate how external, EU-side politics can delay an otherwise cooperative candidate, Georgia illustrates the opposite risk: that a candidate government can itself become the primary obstacle to accession through domestic democratic regression. Georgia applied for EU membership in March 2022, alongside Ukraine and Moldova, but was not granted candidate status until December 2023, and only on the explicit condition that its government implement nine specified reform steps concerning judicial independence, media freedom, and electoral integrity (European External Action Service, 2023).

Rather than progressing on these steps, the Georgian government's trajectory moved in the opposite direction. In June 2024, the European Council concluded that Georgia's accession process was de facto halted following the adoption of a foreign-agents law widely seen as modelled on Russian legislation restricting civil society and independent media (European External Action Service, 2023). Disputed parliamentary elections in October 2024, which the European Parliament later characterized as amounting to a clear shift toward authoritarian governance, were followed by the Georgian government's own announcement in November 2024 that it would not pursue further accession talks until 2028 (European Parliament, 2025). By its 2025 enlargement assessment, the European Commission described Georgia as a candidate country in name only, citing a rapid erosion of the rule of law, restrictions on civic space and freedom of assembly, and the targeting of opposition figures, independent media, and LGBTQ+ representatives (European Parliament, 2025).

The Georgian case is analytically significant for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that the reversibility mechanism built into the 2020 methodology can function as intended: rather than allowing geopolitical enthusiasm to override the fundamentals, the EU suspended concrete progress on Georgia's accession while formally maintaining its candidate status, a distinction that has allowed Brussels to keep the prospect of membership open for a future, reform-minded Georgian government without rewarding the current one. Second, it illustrates the limits of external conditionality where domestic political incentives point the other way: EU-level responses, including the suspension of financial support such as the European Peace Facility and the removal of visa-facilitation measures for Georgian officials, have so far not reversed the government's course, suggesting that a ruling party willing to accept a slower or entirely paused EU trajectory can effectively insulate itself from the EU's principal leverage instruments (European Parliament, 2025).

This dynamic echoes patterns long documented in the Western Balkans, where governments have at times been accused of adopting the formal language and institutional trappings of EU-mandated reform without genuine underlying change, allowing them to sustain international legitimacy while consolidating domestic political control. Georgia's case differs mainly in its abruptness and in the government's explicit, public rejection of the EU trajectory, rather than the more common Western Balkan pattern of continued rhetorical commitment paired with quiet non-compliance.

#### ***2.5 Institutional Constraints: Absorption Capacity and Decision-Making Reform***

The final structural challenge concerns the EU's own institutional readiness to accommodate up to ten additional members, including Ukraine, whose population and agricultural sector alone would reshape the Union's budgetary and voting arithmetic. The Centre for European Reform (2025) notes that concerns about

the EU's absorption capacity are not new: they were widely acknowledged as a precondition for the 2004 "big bang" enlargement, yet only limited institutional reforms were achieved at the Amsterdam and Nice treaty negotiations, owing to a lack of consensus and Member States' reluctance to disturb the existing institutional balance. What is different in the current round, according to the same analysis, is scale: an EU of more than thirty-five members would strain decision-making processes that already rely heavily on unanimity in sensitive areas such as foreign policy, sanctions, and enlargement itself, risking institutional paralysis rather than mere inefficiency.

The most frequently discussed institutional remedy is an extension of qualified majority voting (QMV), particularly within the Common Foreign and Security Policy, where unanimity currently allows any single Member State to block collective action. Since 2023, Germany and France have led a "Group of Friends on Qualified Majority Voting," seeking to use existing treaty mechanisms, such as the passerelle clauses, to expand QMV without requiring a full treaty revision, though such a shift would itself require unanimous agreement, which has not been forthcoming, as smaller Member States fear being regularly outvoted on matters central to their national interests (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2022). The Clingendael Institute (2024) has similarly proposed introducing QMV at specific intermediate stages of the accession process itself, such as the opening or closing of negotiating clusters, precisely in response to cases like the Hungarian veto over Ukraine, arguing that allowing individual Member States to obstruct enlargement over bilateral disputes unrelated to the formal membership criteria undermines both the credibility and the strategic logic of the entire process.

There is, however, no consensus on the sequencing of reform. Some analysts argue that institutional reform must precede or accompany enlargement to avoid replicating the shortcomings of previous rounds (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2022), while others contend that insisting on comprehensive institutional reform as a precondition risks indefinitely delaying accession, given that the EU historically expanded without prior comprehensive reform in 2004 and could plausibly do so again, treating reform instead as a parallel, longer-term project (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2024). This disagreement reflects a genuine institutional dilemma: rushing enlargement without reform risks the institutional paralysis anticipated by the Centre for European Reform. Making the reform a precondition the EU faces always the risk that critical Member States use their veto to delay accession further, precisely at a moment when the EU has sought to frame enlargement as strategically urgent.

### 3. Conclusion

Contemporary EU enlargement practice toward Eastern Europe is best understood as an attempt to reconcile two objectives that pull in different directions: the geopolitical urgency created by Russia's war against Ukraine, which favours rapid, visible progress toward membership, and the EU's longstanding insistence, formalized in the 2020 revised methodology, that fundamental reforms of the rule of law and democratic governance must be substantively, not merely formally, achieved before candidates advance. The cases examined in this paper show that both dynamics are operating simultaneously, but unevenly. Ukraine and Moldova have moved through the formal stages of accession at a genuinely unprecedented pace, yet even their progress has been repeatedly interrupted by intra-EU politics unrelated to their own reform performance, most notably a two-year Hungarian veto resolved only through a bilateral side agreement. Georgia demonstrates the opposite failure mode: a candidate government that has chosen to reverse democratic reforms and explicitly suspend its own EU trajectory, prompting the EU to invoke the reversibility mechanisms built into its own methodology, with only limited leverage to reverse the underlying political dynamic.

These findings suggest that successful enlargement requires more than the fundamentals-first conditionality already embedded in EU practice. It also requires credible, consistently applied incentives that reward genuine reform and consistently sanction backsliding, so that candidate governments cannot indefinitely defer compliance without cost, and reforming governments can trust that compliance will in fact be rewarded with tangible progress. At the same time, the analysis of institutional constraints presented in this paper indicates that conditionality directed at candidates addresses only one side of the enlargement equation. The EU's own unresolved capacity for decision-making in an enlarged Union, particularly the continued reliance on unanimity in foreign policy and accession-related votes, represents a second, internally generated obstacle that is at least as consequential as any single candidate's reform performance, as the Hungarian veto over Ukraine's accession illustrates directly.

Without progress on both fronts, external conditionality toward candidates and internal institutional adaptation within the EU itself, the Union risks a form of enlargement that is politically declared but only partially realized: a Union that grants candidate status and opens negotiations readily, in response to geopolitical pressure, but struggles to translate that political commitment into completed accessions. Such an outcome would carry real costs for EU credibility, both toward candidate populations who have invested

significant political capital in the European perspective, as in Ukraine, Moldova, and, until recently, Georgia, and toward the EU's own claim to be a coherent geopolitical actor capable of matching its strategic ambitions with functioning institutions.

#### 4. Further Research

Several avenues merit further investigation beyond the scope of this paper. First, comparative research tracking the Ukraine-Moldova and Georgia cases over the coming years would allow for a more systematic test of whether the reversibility mechanism in the 2020 methodology functions as a durable deterrent against backsliding, or merely as a temporary pause that candidate governments can wait out, as the Georgian government's own 2028 timeline suggests it may be attempting to do. Second, further work is needed on the political economy of Member State vetoes in the accession process; the Hungarian case demonstrates that bilateral disputes unrelated to the Copenhagen criteria can delay enlargement for years, and systematic analysis of how frequently, and under what conditions, such vetoes are deployed and resolved would inform the ongoing debate on introducing qualified majority voting at intermediate accession stages.

Third, given the divergent findings of Schwarz (2025) and Scicluna (2025) regarding the depth of enlargement's geopoliticization, longitudinal discourse analysis extending into the 2026-2027 period, once Ukraine's negotiations have progressed further or stalled again, would help clarify whether the post-2022 reframing of enlargement represents a lasting shift in EU strategic culture or a temporary response to an acute crisis. Finally, research examining the distributive and budgetary implications of Ukrainian accession in particular, given the scale of its agricultural sector and reconstruction needs, would usefully complement the largely voting-focused institutional reform literature reviewed in this paper, representing a discrete and consequential research question in its own right.

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