

# The Security Dilemma of the Eastward EU Enlargement

Marie Dumoulin & Piotr Buras

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## Executive Summary

In June, the EU opened accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova. However, the enlargement process will take time and is not likely to be accompanied by these two countries' NATO membership. This makes for a security dilemma: while enlargement is supposed to strengthen the EU's security, it will not happen unless the EU contributes more to the stability of its Eastern neighbours in the likely event of the absence of a lasting peace settlement. Security and defence should thus play a central role in the "geopolitical" enlargement process, and the EU should build upon the recently signed security agreement with Ukraine to secure resources for a long-term support and defense cooperation.

With the formal opening of the accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova on June 26, the first phase of the new enlargement chapter has been closed. It was opened in February 2022 by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which changed the EU's perception of its eastern neighbourhood and its approach to this region. The decision to grant candidate status to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine was the result of a shared awareness of the high vulnerability of these countries as long as they remain outside of the EU. But this decision may also change the nature of EU integration: since 1992, EU integration has been based on the four freedoms, and thus required member states to be ready for the competition these principles introduced among them – hence the importance of the social and economic convergence among member states. The discussions about enlargement to the Western Balkans introduced a security dimension, as EU integration was also meant as a stabilizing factor for the region and an incentive to solve bilateral disputes. This approach has not been very successful until now and has created new dilemmas, as the merit-based approach conflicted with ambitions to stabilize the region. While this process is still in limbo, the integration of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine brings new challenges: these three countries do not control the entirety of their territory, and Ukraine is in a state of war. Their EU integration is supposed to grant them protection, which brings a new meaning to the EU project as a whole: from a freedom-based peace project, it is supposed to become an element of

collective security. Beyond the usual debates triggered by enlargement as such, this future new wave of enlargement brings additional challenges and dilemmas for EU decision-makers:

In many ways, the current debate echoes discussions that took place ahead of the previous enlargements. The discussions about the *financial impact* of the future enlargement and possible *adaptations of sectoral policies* (including the common agricultural policy) and cohesion funds are quite similar to what was discussed ahead of the “Big bang” enlargement. Back then, the founding member states were wary of the costs of integrating countries that still had huge investment needs to catch up with EU standards and that would change the existing balance of contributors/beneficiaries of certain policies. Neither the discussions about the *institutional adjustments* that will be necessary to integrate up to 10 new member states are really new; nor reservations in current member states about possible treaty changes. Against the background of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, member states share a common understanding of the new geopolitical urgency to proceed with enlargement. But this context creates dilemmas to which they provide different and sometimes contradictory answers. Not all of them are new. But the circumstances of the enlargement happening in times of war makes for a truly unprecedented challenge.

**The internal efficiency dilemma.** Some EU member states argue that candidate countries cannot be integrated before the EU has conducted internal reforms. However, by lack of a consensus on the extent and modalities of these reforms, this insistence may end up in a “catch 22” situation for candidate countries and undermine the credibility of the enlargement perspective, which in turn would undermine incentives for candidate countries to conduct reforms.

**The consistency dilemma.** The enlargement policy is based on a merit-based approach but has also up to now avoided dissociating candidate countries in the Western Balkans in an attempt to make enlargement an instrument for stabilising the region. But by treating these countries, as a group, the EU has de facto disincentivised the reforms that were at the core of a merit-based approach. Adding more candidate countries to the equation will not necessarily increase the chances of a strictly merit-based approach and may on the contrary incite politically motivated discounts, which would affect the effectiveness of conditionalities.

**The resilience dilemma.** The appropriation of EU *acquis*, as well as the conditionalities and the broader socio-economic convergence process that lie at the core of the current approach to enlargement are meant to achieve a profound and durable transformation of candidate countries, e.g. in order to prepare them to face competition within the single market. While the current geopolitical challenges may require speeding up the accession for countries like Ukraine or Moldova, to reduce their vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia, this may end up actually reducing the incentives for structural reforms and weakening these countries over the long term.

Striking the right balance between the speed and the ambitions of the enlargement process will be key to increase its credibility and efficiency in the short term and, ultimately, make it a success once candidate countries meet the relevant criteria. However, what makes the enlargement in times of war a unique challenge is the *security dilemma*. The geopolitical character of enlargement that the European leaders insist on rests upon the assumption that bringing new countries into the EU (most notably Ukraine and Moldova) will strengthen European security. Russia’s all-out war against Ukraine demonstrated that grey zones no longer exist in Europe. An alternative to Ukraine’s (and to lesser extent other countries aspiring

to become EU members) integration with the EU seems not to be their in-between status but rather their drifting away into the sphere of Russian (or Chinese or Turkish) interests. Not less worrying would be the prospect of Ukraine – a country which needs to defend its Western orientation in a war against a powerful aggressor - whose European ambitions have been ignored or frustrated. A post-war Ukraine turning its back to the EU could easily become a risk for rather than a pillar of the European security architecture. The enlargement perspective is not only a testimony to the long-term commitment of the EU; it is also meant to create favourable conditions for post-war reconstruction and the return of refugees.

However, what makes for the security dilemma is a paradox: the EU enlargement which is rightly seen as a precondition for the block's long-term security and stability will not happen unless the Europeans themselves provide sufficient security to Ukraine. It is inconceivable that the EU could accept Ukraine as a new member (or provide a credible accession perspective) as long as the country is at war and - even if case of a ceasefire or truce should a full victory not be achieved – is not adequately protected against potential future aggressions. In other words: before Ukraine's and Moldova's integration with the EU can boost Europe's security, it is the EU which will have to provide protection for them.

Does the EU have the capacity to do so? The “Big bang” EU enlargement was preceded by the accession of all candidate countries to NATO. Except for Cyprus, none of them had open territorial disputes, as do Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. At this stage there is no certainty that these disputes will have been solved when Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia join the EU, or that candidate countries will want to join NATO and be accepted in the alliance. The upcoming NATO summit in Washington on 9-11 June will demonstrate the alliance's commitment to Ukraine but at the same time will not be able to hide that NATO membership – the best and only credible security guarantee – is not available in the near future. The US presidential election later this year may not make this perspective more realistic.

This implies that, once the dust of the EU and NATO summits have settled in, the EU member states will have to pay more attention to security and defence as a part of the enlargement process. Including Ukraine in the accelerated EU efforts to ramp up military production and bolstering its own defence should be a priority. The bilateral security agreements signed by a number of EU countries with Ukraine are a good beginning. At the recent EU summit, the EU signed a security agreement with Ukraine promising support and consultations. However, the document lacks new financial commitments and (not surprisingly) any sort of hard security guarantees. The current security arrangements are thus insufficient to solve the security dilemma.

## Recommendations

In the short term, the EU will need to develop a joint emergency plan to ensure that Ukrainian forces can sustain the war for the next few months. This needs to revolve around three urgent priorities: *ammunition* (to hold the front line), *air and missile defense* (to protect cities and infrastructures) and *spare parts* (to maintain donated Western equipment). A well-coordinated approach where nations know that they can rely on each other would enable to free more weapons currently in stock and make a difference.

The security agreement which the EU and Ukraine signed in June should be a basis for a long-term EU defense and security cooperation with Ukraine (and Moldova) which should not be seen as an alternative to NATO membership. Instead, it should provide maximum security which is necessary to make Ukraine's progress towards the EU possible even if the final settlement of the conflict should prove a long-distance goal.

Most importantly, the EU needs to secure financial means to sustain military support for Ukraine beyond currently agreed levels and timelines.



**Marie Dumoulin**

Director of the Wider Europe programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR).



**Piotr Buras**

Head of ECFR's Warsaw office, Senior Policy Fellow at ECFR.

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