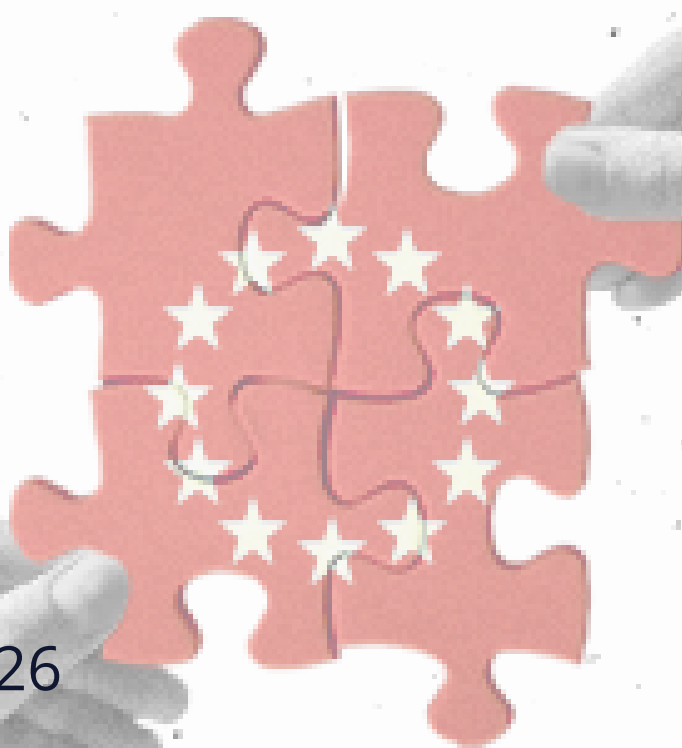




Report

WESTERN BALKANS FIRST? ENLARGEMENT WITH UKRAINE AND MOLDOVA IN FOCUS



April 2026

About EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think tank focused on European integration and cohesion. It contributes to strengthening democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe, while also supporting the active engagement of the Czech Republic within the European Union.

EUROPEUM conducts original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and develops new ideas and policy recommendations aimed at improving both national and European decision-making processes.



EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, in cooperation with the Think Visegrad Platform, organized the public discussion “Western Balkans First? Enlargement with Ukraine and Moldova in Focus” on Thursday, 23 April 2026, from 15:00 to 17:00 at the EUROPEUM Offices in Brussels (Avenue de Broqueville 40, 1200 Woluwe-Saint-Lambert).

The event focused on the future of EU enlargement in the context of current geopolitical challenges, with particular attention to the Western Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova. The discussion reflected on the changing security environment in Europe following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and highlighted enlargement as a strategic tool for stability, democratic resilience, and long-term security.

The speakers were:

Thomas Hagleitner, European Commission (DG ENEST)

Tomáš Strážay, Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA)

Tomasz Żornaczuk, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)

Berta López Domènech, European Policy Centre (EPC)

Main Points of the Discussion

- **Russia's war against Ukraine significantly accelerated the political momentum for the EU enlargement** process involving Ukraine and Moldova, while the European Commission has been pushing to speed up accession negotiations.
- **Panelists highlighted the tension between geopolitical priorities and the merit-based accession principle**, emphasizing that EU membership should remain conditional on reforms, rule of law, and compliance with European standards.
- **A major topic was the gradual integration of candidate countries into EU policies before full membership.** However, participants warned against creating a form of "second-class membership" without a credible path toward full accession.
- **Montenegro and Albania were identified as the most advanced candidates in the accession process**, while Ukraine was described as a unique case of a country simultaneously fighting a war during the accession process.
- **Participants stressed that EU enlargement is no longer viewed only as a technical process**, but increasingly as a tool of security, stabilization, and geopolitical influence.
- **A significant part of the discussion focused on whether the EU itself is prepared for further enlargement.** Some speakers argued that calls for internal EU reforms are often used as a justification for delaying enlargement decisions.
- **Public support for enlargement was also discussed. According to recent data, 56% of EU citizens support further enlargement**, while

support for EU membership in the Western Balkans remains high at around 64%.

- **The final part of the debate addressed China's growing influence in the Western Balkans through infrastructure** and energy investments, which many participants viewed as a geopolitical challenge for the EU.
- Key recommendations included:
 1. **preserving the credibility of the merit-based accession process,**
 2. **strengthening gradual integration of candidate countries,**
 3. **establishing realistic enlargement timelines,**
 4. **improving communication about the benefits of enlargement,**
 5. **reinforcing the EU's strategic presence in the Western Balkans.**

Introduction

The opening part of the debate focused on whether the European Union has already managed to transform itself into a geopolitical actor. The panelists agreed that Russia's war against Ukraine has fundamentally reshaped the perception of enlargement and significantly accelerated the political momentum surrounding the accession processes of Ukraine and Moldova. ¹The discussion also took place against the backdrop of renewed pressure from the European Commission to speed up negotiations, with **Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos urging member states to open all accession clusters for Ukraine and Moldova by July.** ²In Brussels, there is growing belief that recent political developments in Hungary may create a new window of opportunity to overcome the current deadlock in the enlargement process. Nevertheless, the panelists differed considerably in their views on whether the EU is truly prepared to act strategically and cohesively.

“Enlargement is important, but it cannot happen at any cost. If it ceases to be transformative, we risk importing problems into the EU instead of stability.”

The discussion also reflected the broader debate currently taking place within the EU over the future shape of Ukraine's accession process. ¹As recently reported by the Financial Times, **Germany and France are considering forms of gradual or “associate” integration for**

Ukraine that would grant Kyiv symbolic participation in EU structures before full membership, while postponing access to key benefits such as agricultural subsidies, cohesion funding, and voting rights. ²As President Zelenskyy has

² Jorge Liboreiro, “Ukraine and Hungary move to resolve deadlock over minority rights that has stalled Kyiv's EU bid,” Euronews, published on 20 May 2026. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/05/01/after-orbans-defeat-the-eu-faces-tough-questions-about-ukraines-accession>

repeatedly stressed, however, Ukraine does not view its future as lying in a permanent halfway status

“Enlargement is important, but it cannot happen at any cost. If it ceases to be transformative, we risk importing problems into the EU instead of stability,” the speaker argued during the discussion.

Another panelist pointed to the gap between the political declarations made by member states and their actual behaviour in practice. According to him, while the EU officially declares its support for enlargement, it remains unclear whether there is genuine and unified political will among member states to move the process forward.

⁴As examples, he referred to tensions between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, as well as broader domestic political developments in several member states. Since 2020, Bulgaria has been blocking the start of EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia, arguing that Skopje has not fully implemented bilateral agreements between the two countries. The dispute mainly concerns historical issues, language, and the rights of the Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia.

⁵This is not the first time North Macedonia’s EU path has been delayed by bilateral disputes. Greece had previously blocked the country’s progress for years over the use of the name “Macedonia”. The issue was resolved through the 2018 Prespa

³ Andy Bounds, Henry Foy and Marton Dunai, “France and Germany plan ‘symbolic’ EU membership benefits for Ukraine,” [Financial Times](https://www.ft.com/content/d44b90f3-cc5c-4681-b5e6-6a3b70936204?syn-25a6b1a6=1), published on 20 April 2026. <https://www.ft.com/content/d44b90f3-cc5c-4681-b5e6-6a3b70936204?syn-25a6b1a6=1>

⁴ Jan Nowinowski, “Waiting for Godot: Prospects for resolving the Bulgaria–North Macedonia dispute,” OSW Commentary, published on 26 March 2026. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2026-03-26/waiting-godot-prospects-resolving-bulgaria-north-macedonia>

⁵ Branislav Staniček, “North Macedonia,” European Parliament Think Tank, published on 12 April 2024. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA\(2024\)760411](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA(2024)760411)

Agreement, after which the country changed its name to North Macedonia. In the panelist's view, it remains uncertain whether the EU will be able to maintain a coherent and consistent approach over the long term.

⁶ Building on the argument that enlargement has become a priority for the European Council, the discussion highlighted the increasingly central role of national leaders in shaping the future of EU enlargement. As the institution bringing together heads of state and government, the European Council holds the highest political authority within the Union to decide on the desirability, direction and pace of enlargement. In this sense, it has become the political centre of gravity of the EU, particularly in moments of geopolitical crisis.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine demonstrated how external shocks can force the European Council to redefine strategic priorities and formulate collective political responses. Enlargement is therefore no longer viewed solely as a technical accession process, but increasingly as an instrument of geopolitical influence, security and stabilization.

At the same time, speakers emphasized that although **EU enlargement has acquired a much stronger geopolitical dimension in recent years**, this does not alter the fundamental nature of the accession process, which continues to be firmly rooted in merit, reforms and compliance with EU standards.

The Merit-Based Principle Under Geopolitical Pressure

One of the most prominent themes of the discussion was whether the EU can combine geopolitical urgency with the merit-based principle.

Several panelists pointed out that after 2022, a perception emerged that the European Union must choose between geopolitics and reforms. However, this framing was challenged during the debate. According to one speaker, the problem

does not lie in the merit-based principle itself, but rather in the EU's inconsistency in applying it.

As an example, Bosnia and Herzegovina was mentioned. Attention was drawn to a situation in which the European Commission positively assessed the adoption of a law on conflict of interest, while subsequent country reports concluded that the law did not meet European standards or was not being implemented.

According to the speaker, such an approach undermines the credibility of conditionality.

"The problem is not that the process is merit-based. The problem is that the EU is not consistent in applying it," was said during the debate.

It was argued that European leaders had for years failed to respond adequately to the deterioration of democracy and the rule of law.

⁶ Lucas Schramm, "Navigating widening and deepening: the European Council, geopolitical motives, and Union enlargement," *Journal of European Integration*, published in 2025.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07036337.2025.2457007>

⁷ Mike Smeltzer, "A Moment of Reckoning for Serbian Corruption," Freedom House, published on 10 April 2025.
<https://freedomhouse.org/article/moment-reckoning-serbian-corruption>

⁷ At the same time, many citizens, activists, and civic initiatives in Serbia argue that if the European Union and the United States genuinely aim to preserve long-term stability and prosperity, they cannot continue overlooking democratic decline for the sake of short-term geopolitical calculations. According to this view, the increasingly pragmatic

Discussion acknowledged the growing political frustration caused by the length of the accession process. Implementing reforms requires governments to invest significant political capital over many years, while prolonged uncertainty often weakens both political momentum and public

approach toward Serbia risks undermining the credibility of Western support for the rule of law, democratic institutions, and fundamental freedoms, while simultaneously encouraging authoritarian tendencies across the wider Western Balkans region.

One speaker stressed that the **European Union's enlargement process cannot function without a credible merit-based principle.** In this view, accession without sufficient political and institutional preparedness would ultimately create difficulties not only for candidate countries, but also for the EU itself.

At the same time, the discussion acknowledged the growing political frustration caused by the length of the accession process. Implementing reforms requires governments to invest significant political capital over many years, while prolonged uncertainty often weakens both political momentum and public support in candidate states.

As a response to these challenges, three key areas were highlighted: the gradual opening and closing of negotiation chapters, financial instruments such as EU

growth plans, and the progressive integration of candidate countries into selected EU policies prior to full membership.

Gradual Integration and the “New Membership”

A significant part of the discussion focused on the idea of the gradual integration of candidate countries into the European Union.

One participant recalled that Poland had long been skeptical of models that could replace full EU membership or create a form of “second-class membership.” For years, the concept of gradual integration appeared in EU documents without a clearly defined political or institutional framework.

According to several speakers, however, the debate is now beginning to evolve. There is growing consensus that any measures bringing candidate countries closer to the EU and delivering tangible benefits to their citizens can be useful — provided that full membership remains the ultimate objective.

At the same time, participants warned about potential risks. Partial participation in selected EU policies could create frustration if it is not accompanied by credible progress toward accession itself. Several speakers stressed that indefinitely postponing enlargement without a **clear political horizon risks undermining the credibility of the entire process**. In this context, reference was made to the experience of Central European countries prior to the 2004 enlargement, when clearly defined timelines helped mobilize political elites and maintain public support for reforms

⁸ Clearly defined accession timelines, especially those shaped during the late 1990s and consolidated **at the 2002 Copenhagen European Council, gave candidate countries a tangible and credible sense of direction**. The existence of a realistic membership perspective helped political leaders justify difficult reforms,

concentrate political capital, and sustain public backing throughout demanding economic, legal, and institutional transformations.

The enlargement framework also created a powerful system of incentives: candidate countries understood that concrete progress in reforms and alignment with the EU acquis would be directly linked to advancement in the accession process.

⁹According to this perspective, it is therefore unsurprising that candidate countries are increasingly presenting their own target dates for accession — **such as Montenegro’s ambition to join the EU by 2028**. In May, Montenegro’s path toward European Union membership advanced further as EU officials formally launched work on the accession treaty that would eventually enable the Western Balkan country to join the bloc. Montenegro has so far provisionally closed 14 out of the 33 negotiation chapters required for membership. According to EU officials, the move represents an important signal that enlargement remains a credible objective for candidate countries.

This dynamic was also highlighted during the discussion, where participants noted that the **European Commission has in recent years increasingly encouraged candidate countries to define more realistic and politically credible timelines** for their accession processes, particularly regarding the completion of negotiations and implementation of key reforms.

⁸ A. Broughton, “EU enlargement date set at Copenhagen Council,” Eurofound, published on 30 January 2003. <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/all/eu-enlargement-date-set-copenhagen-council>

⁹ Jorge Liboreiro, “Marking 20 years of independence, Montenegro eyes EU as next milestone,” Euronews, published on 21 May 2026. Euronews <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/05/21/marking-20-years-of-independence-montenegro-eyes-eu-as-next-milestone>

The Western Balkans versus Ukraine

Another major part of the debate addressed whether the EU is applying the same standards and political approach to the Western Balkans as it does to Ukraine and Moldova.

Several participants acknowledged that frustration has been growing across the Western Balkans. The region has waited more than two decades for substantial progress toward EU membership, while Ukraine has received unprecedented political attention since 2022.

At the same time, **speakers rejected the idea that the EU is operating with two entirely separate enlargement methodologies.** However, it was emphasized that the Western Balkans should not be viewed as a homogeneous region.

Montenegro and Albania were identified as the countries currently making the most significant progress in the accession process. According to one participant, the gap between these countries and the rest of the region is gradually widening due to the scale of reforms and political commitment invested in the process.

Ukraine, meanwhile, was described as a unique case in the history of EU enlargement.

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territorial integrity,” one speaker noted during the debate.

Other participants stressed that the EU must clearly demonstrate to the **Western Balkans that the region remains strategically important.**

According to this view, the issue is not whether the EU should treat the Balkans

identically to Ukraine, but whether it can remain credible and consistent in its enlargement policy.

Surprisingly, public support for EU membership among Western Balkan citizens remains high despite years of slow progress in the enlargement process.¹⁰Reference was made to the Balkan Barometer 2025 survey, according to which an **average of 64% of citizens across the region support EU membership** — the highest level recorded since 2015 and a significant increase compared to the previous year. According to the discussion, this demonstrates that the European perspective continues to retain strong societal support across the Western Balkans.

It was also recalled that support for enlargement toward the Western Balkans existed in several EU member states long before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and that support for Ukraine should be understood as part of the same broader strategic approach.

At the same time, some speakers pointed out that Ukraine’s eventual accession will raise particularly sensitive questions in areas such as agriculture, transport, and the functioning of the single market.

Is the EU Ready for Further Enlargement?

The discussion later shifted toward the preparedness of the European Union itself.

Several participants argued that the need for internal EU reforms is often used as a justification for delaying enlargement decisions. According to this view, debates

¹⁰ Marija Risteska, “Balkan Barometer 2025: Record high support for EU membership in the region,” European Western Balkans, published on 23 December 2025. European Western Balkans <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/12/23/balkan-barometer-2025-record-high-support-for-eu-membership-in-the-region/>

suggesting that smaller countries such as Montenegro are “manageable,” while Ukraine represents too large a challenge, reveal broader uncertainty among member states about their own willingness to reform the Union.

Another speaker argued that historically, the EU has often reformed itself precisely during periods of enlargement.

“Internal EU reforms do not happen despite enlargement, but because of it,” it was stated during the debate.

According to this perspective, member states are often less concerned about enlargement itself than about the internal political and institutional consequences that new membership would require.

Participants also noted that many of the problems currently associated with the future accession of Ukraine — including complicated decision-making in areas such as foreign policy or taxation — already exist within the EU today.

Is Public Support and Communicating Enlargement

A large part of the debate also focused on how enlargement should be communicated to European publics.

One speaker emphasized the importance of citizens having direct personal experiences with candidate countries. Albania was mentioned as an example of a country that had long been associated in Western media primarily with crime, but which is increasingly becoming a popular tourist destination.

¹¹**According to recent public opinion data, 56% of EU citizens support further enlargement of the European Union.** For many Europeans, enlargement continues to be associated with greater security, economic opportunities, and the strengthening of democratic values across the continent. At the same time, the

discussion highlighted that sustaining public backing for enlargement will require clearer and more targeted communication about its long-term benefits, as well as more effective responses to public concerns in both Member States and candidate countries.

According to this view, people-to-people contacts, travel, Erasmus exchanges, and cultural cooperation are often more effective in changing perceptions than large-scale communication campaigns.

Another participant stressed that citizens must see concrete benefits from enlargement.

“If people do not feel tangible advantages, enlargement will remain an elite project,” it was argued during the discussion.

It was also noted that in some member states, enlargement has traditionally been associated with security, stability, and prosperity in Europe. However, participants warned that as the presence of Ukrainians in some EU societies grows, enlargement could increasingly become a subject of domestic political polarization.

Overall, speakers agreed that communication about enlargement must be adapted to the political realities and priorities of individual member states.

China, Investments, and Strategic Competition

Toward the end of the debate, participants also addressed the growing influence of China in the Western Balkans. Speakers noted that Chinese investments in infrastructure, energy, and transport often emerge in areas where the EU has

¹¹ European Commission, “2025 Enlargement Package shows progress towards EU membership for key enlargement partners,” European Commission Press Corner, published on 3 November 2025. European Commission Press Corner https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_2584

struggled to deliver sufficiently fast or visible results. At the same time, it was argued that the issue is more complex than a simple geopolitical competition between Brussels and Beijing.

As an example, one participant referred to the continuation of motorway construction in Montenegro. ¹²In 2021, Montenegro emerged as a striking illustration of the vulnerabilities associated with **China's expanding economic footprint in the Western Balkans**. The country faced mounting financial pressure after taking on a massive loan from China's Exim Bank to finance the construction of a highly controversial highway project. As costs escalated, concerns grew that the project could push Montenegro into unsustainable debt, with liabilities at one stage amounting to more than one-third of the state's annual budget.

The episode triggered alarm within the European Union, which increasingly viewed the case not merely as a financial issue, but as a geopolitical warning sign regarding Beijing's growing influence in the region. In response, the **EU intensified its scrutiny of Chinese engagement in the Western Balkans, expanded internal capacities dedicated to monitoring China-related developments**, and ultimately stepped in to support Montenegro in avoiding deeper financial dependence on Beijing. The case became a symbolic reminder of how economic leverage can translate into broader strategic influence in countries whose EU accession prospects remain uncertain and prolonged.

Although the EU provided financing and imposed conditions based on European standards, European companies reportedly showed little interest in participating in the project.

According to this perspective, it is therefore insufficient to speak only about "pushing China out" without also examining the competitiveness of European actors and differences between economic sectors.

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Other participants stressed that the EU must clearly demonstrate to the **Western Balkans that the region remains strategically important.**

According to this view, the issue is not whether the EU should treat the Balkans identically to Ukraine, but whether it can remain credible and consistent in its enlargement policy.

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¹² Vladimir Shopov, “Eyes Wide Shut: How to Read China’s Playbook in the Western Balkans,” *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR)*, published on 4 November 2025. ECFR <https://ecfr.eu/publication/eyes-wide-shut-how-to-read-chinas-playbook-in-the-western-balkans/>

Key Recommendations for the Future of EU Enlargement Policy

1. **Preserve the credibility of the merit-based accession process** – EU enlargement must remain grounded in reforms, the rule of law, and compliance with European standards, rather than being driven solely by geopolitical considerations.
2. **Strengthen the gradual integration of candidate countries** – allow candidate states to participate in selected EU policies before full membership, while maintaining a clear and credible pathway toward full accession.
3. **Establish realistic and politically credible enlargement timelines** – clearly defined accession targets help sustain reform momentum, public support, and political commitment within candidate countries.
4. **Improve communication about the benefits of enlargement to European publics** – citizens in EU member states need to see the concrete economic, security, and societal advantages of further enlargement.
5. **Reinforce the EU's strategic presence in the Western Balkans** – the European Union should respond more visibly and effectively in areas such as investment, infrastructure, and economic cooperation in order to limit the growing influence of China and other geopolitical actors in the region.