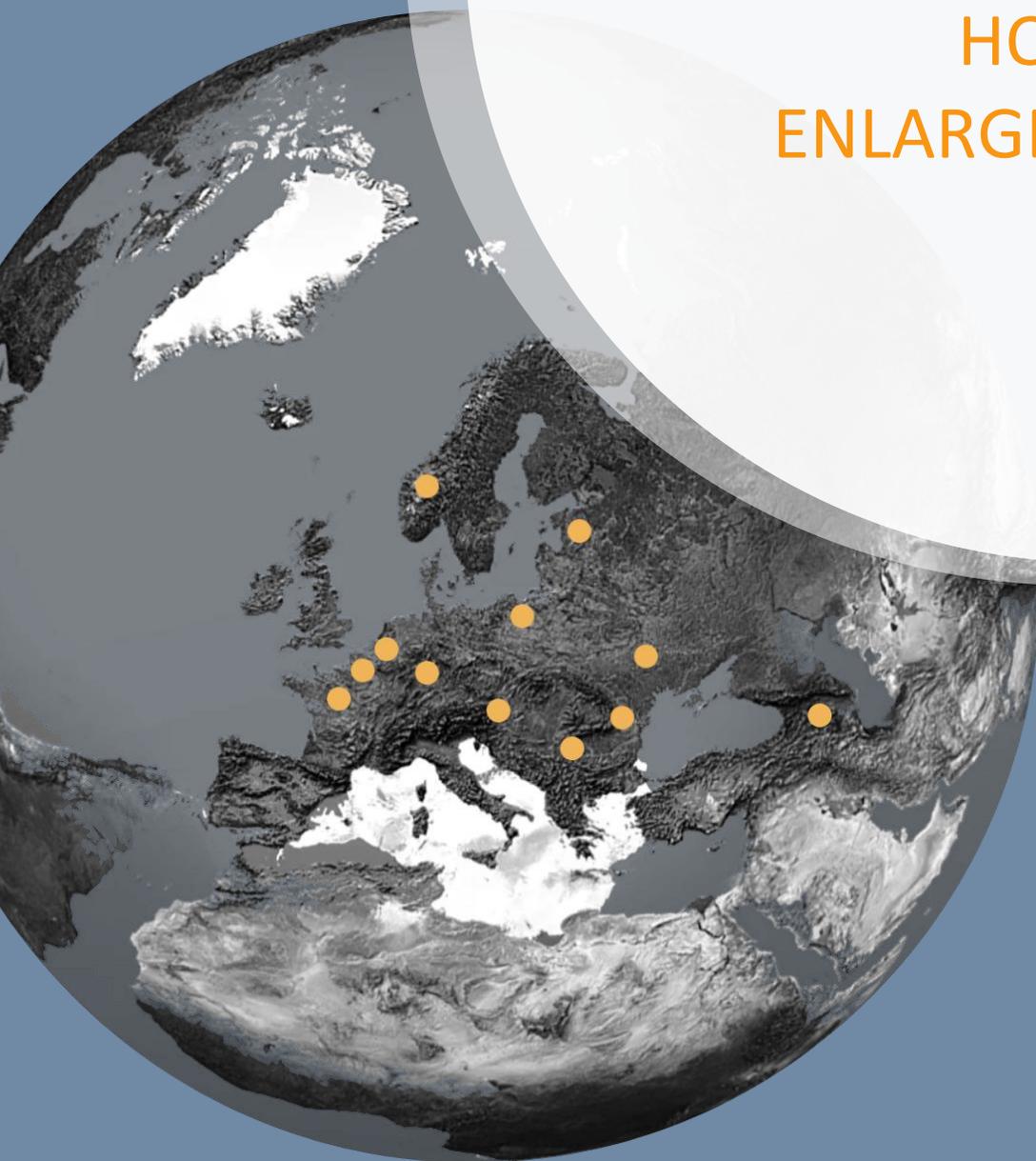REUNIR

MAPPING POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND OFFERING RECOMMENDATIONS ON HOW TO REVISE ENLARGEMENT & EAP POLICIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the European Union (EU) prepares for a new wave of enlargement to include Candidate Countries (CCs) from the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood, a range of challenges needs to be addressed. Developments are unfolding against a complex and volatile international backdrop that includes Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine as well as hybrid external threats targeting CCs, creating a sense of geopolitical urgency.

In this context, the EU and its Member States (MS) have been debating how to adapt enlargement policies to ensure a robust and credible integration process, while mitigating risks of internal disruption after accession. A number of ideas have emerged on how to maintain the enlargement momentum, how to address growing democratic backsliding, and how to ensure the EU's own internal preparedness.

These include deepening pre-accession integration of CCs in both the economic and security domains, while maintaining respect for the democratic fundamentals at the core of the process. This implies better connecting CCs to existing EU structures while developing new joint cooperation frameworks, making the integration process more reciprocal and allowing the EU to also benefit from CCs' experience. Ultimately, enlargement should be embedded within a clearly articulated political project that engages both MS and CCs at all political and societal levels.

This policy brief maps the current policy debate and analyses EU and MS preferences for enlargement and neighbourhood policies, based on 72 interviews with 77 respondents conducted in six MS – namely Austria, Estonia, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland – between November 2025 and February 2026, which are representative of the different positions on enlargement within the EU[1]. The paper then identifies options for future EU policies.

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[1] See annex

1. CONTEXT

As of early 2026, the prospect of new members joining the EU is becoming more tangible. Montenegro and Albania aim to close accession negotiations by late 2026 and 2027 respectively. Moldova has made significant progress – albeit from a lower base – and Ukraine's accession could feature in a future peace settlement with Russia. However, the new prospective enlargement to the Western Balkans (WB) and the Eastern Neighbourhood (EN) takes place in a context where CCs face multiple hybrid security, as well as socio-economic and political threats from malign external actors that can hinder their European integration.

These perspectives raise pressing questions about how to translate political commitment into a credible and workable accession process. The EU needs to reconcile the geopolitical imperatives of enlargement with its merit-based approach grounded in the fundamentals and alignment with the acquis.

While new initiatives have emerged to accelerate and deepen integration, how enlargement can effectively unfold remains undecided. Multiple ideas and proposals are under discussion in EU political and academic circles, but key choices are still unresolved. Ensuring robust and sustainable European integration will require adjustments not only in the policies and instruments extended to CCs, but also within the EU itself, which needs to demonstrate readiness to accept new members. In both the short and long term, adaptation will be required from CCs, but also from the EU and its MS.

2. REVISION OF THE EU'S ENLARGEMENT POLICY

Revision of the EU's enlargement policy is clearly on the agenda, with numerous proposals circulating. Little has been formally decided however, and MS views on the future of EU enlargement do not always converge. Interviews conducted in six countries highlight diverse positions, not only across the MS but also across the political spectrum within each of them.[2]

This section examines the current debates and Member State preferences for revising the EU's enlargement policy that emerged from these interviews. It assesses discussions surrounding enlargement methodologies, various elements of EU governance in the context of enlargement and takes account of the security dimension. It also takes account of MS views on economic integration and democratic governance, in particular support for civil society.

2.1. Accession Methodology and Tools

The unprecedented challenge facing the EU is how to reconcile the **geopolitical imperatives** of enlargement, as acknowledged by the EU and its MS since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, with the established and lengthy merit-based process leading to accession. Of particular concern is the fragility of democratic institutions and the rule of law in CCs. The Commission is currently reflecting on the elaboration of new accession treaties, which would include additional safeguards against post-accession backsliding.

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[2] Not all political parties and ideological stances could be covered during the interviews. Notably, representatives of far-right and far-left parties are not included due to the absence of responses or unavailability.

Concepts such as gradual integration and staged accession were developed to accommodate the need for an **accelerated integration** and the credibility of reforms. In these formats, CCs would progressively get access to more EU policies, institutions and tangible benefits prior to formal accession, provided they conduct the required reforms. A perceived advantage of gradual integration formats is that they would allow for keeping the momentum for reforms in CCs through concrete incentives, while giving time for the EU to reform internally.

There is a relative consensus among EU MS that the current accession methodology provides a structured and effective framework for guiding reforms in CCs. Many see its **merit-based approach** as enabling the EU to objectively evaluate progress while maintaining conditionality, though some express concern about the insufficient emphasis placed on safeguarding the fundamentals. Peer-to-peer cooperation and technical assistance instruments remain particularly valued. Programmes such as Twinning and TAIEX are regarded as effective in strengthening institutional capacity and accelerating regulatory alignment. Negotiations around clusters with a focus on fundamentals across the process, as well as conditionality in financial support, are generally seen as effective.

While several MS (such as Austria) favour **setting target dates for accession** to demonstrate a serious commitment to enlargement, others (France, Estonia) oppose this move, arguing this could either relax reform efforts or create risks of the EU overpromising and failing to deliver.

2.2. EU Governance in the Context of Enlargement

Communication and Public Support on Enlargement

A major challenge lies in the **political communication of enlargement**. EU messaging is often perceived as overly technical, failing to clearly explain the strategic rationale and benefits of enlargement to European citizens. In MS where public support is fragile, this communication gap risks undermining the ratification of future accession treaties.

Strengthening public legitimacy therefore requires clearer EU and MS narratives on the geopolitical, economic, and societal benefits of enlargement, alongside transparent discussions of challenges—particularly in sensitive sectors such as agriculture or cohesion policy.

Enlargement Decision-Making and Institutional Dynamics

Significant divergence remains among MS regarding the **geopolitical acceleration** of accession. Some (especially in Austria, Estonia and Poland) argue for differentiated treatment between EN and WB countries, while others (especially in France, Germany and the Netherlands) insist on **equal treatment across candidates**. Among the latter, some respondents in Germany mentioned front-loading the current frontrunners from both regions. Among the former, while Austria opposes preferential treatment for EN countries, supporting WB accession, some other respondents support the possibility of exceptional arrangements for Ukraine within the framework of future peace negotiations. Polish respondents for example stressed the different challenges raised by CC accession. While the primary issue in the case of the WB relates to compliance with the fundamentals and the potential alignment of future governments with

existing illiberal actors within the EU, Ukraine presents a much more complex challenge due to its size, structural economic differences—particularly in agriculture, transport — and the broader implications of post-war reconstruction. Concerns have also been raised in Austria about **selective enlargement**, particularly in the WB, which could create new regional tensions if only some countries progress toward membership.

A key debate concerns possible revisions to the EU's decision-making process in **enlargement negotiations**, which are heavy and lengthy, and leave space for obstructions by certain MS through their veto right. Every step in the accession process has turned into a potential veto opportunity. Rather than building public acceptance, this "institutionalised vetocracy enables political hostage-taking". Experts and politicians are reflecting on how to rationalise this process by reducing instances where unanimity is required, for instance by shifting to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) for interim benchmarks or when opening and closing negotiation chapters, and displacing bilateral disputes in other diplomatic instances. Such proposals have also emerged at high political levels, as was illustrated by European Council President Antonio Costa's proposal to switch to QMV for the opening of negotiating clusters, while maintaining unanimity for closing them.

MS remain divided on whether and how the EU's decision-making procedures in enlargement policy should be adapted. While there is a shared recognition that the current process is too slow and vulnerable to political blockages, governments differ significantly in their assessment of how far institutional change should go and how it might affect the political legitimacy of enlargement.

Some MS, such as Austria, argue that the process should be **accelerated and rationalised**, particularly at the technical stages of accession negotiations. From this perspective, maintaining unanimity for every procedural step could unnecessarily delay progress and increase the scope for politicisation. Moving certain technical decisions outside unanimity has therefore been suggested as a way to streamline the process while preserving MS control over key political milestones. Concerns have also been raised about the use of bilateral vetoes, which are seen by some respondents, especially in Austria and Estonia, as one of the most damaging features of the current framework as they allow national disputes to obstruct the overall enlargement agenda.

MS however remain reluctant to modify the unanimity requirement. In their view, **unanimity plays an important role** in ensuring that enlargement decisions retain strong political legitimacy within national contexts. In countries where public support for enlargement remains uncertain or fragile, governments emphasise the need to maintain full political control over the process in order to secure domestic acceptance and avoid difficulties in ratifying accession treaties. This concern is particularly salient in MS where domestic political dynamics could become a decisive factor in the final stages of accession, such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands. Nevertheless, removing unanimity at more technical steps would not eliminate the possibility of vetoing at more fundamental/political steps, including the "ultimate veto" for accession.

In practice**, pragmatic adaptations** have begun to emerge in order to mitigate procedural blockages without formally changing the institutional framework. One example is the European Commission continuing to conduct the technical preparations of accession negotiations while awaiting formal decisions by the Council. This approach has already been applied in the case of Ukraine, allowing preparatory work to progress even when political agreement among MS is still pending. Such arrangements illustrate how greater flexibility

within the existing system may help maintain momentum in the enlargement process while preserving current decision-making rules.

EU governance at 30+

Another key issue in the context of enlargement is the **adaptation of the EU's institutional framework** to be able to function as an EU of 30-plus members. Discussions here focus on making the budget more flexible (with, for instance, capping mechanisms adapted to individual cases), reducing the size of the Commission or changing the setup of the European Parliament, and extending the use of QMV to more policies. The idea of differentiated integration has re-emerged, involving different circles and levels of integration, from having a core of highly integrated MS to outer circles operating within looser frameworks.

As with the models of gradual integration, this raises the perceived risk of **second tier MS**, which would also be problematic in light of the EU's principle of equality among members. Discussions about creating a special status for new acceding states, for instance with limited voting rights, are usually subject to the condition that such arrangements should remain temporary, pending acceptance as full members with equal rights (see e.g., the proposal for Nominated Member States). The prospect of accession without full voting rights would alleviate fears among certain MS of further blockages and abuses of veto power. However, not all CCs view this positively, particularly Montenegro, which is already far advanced in the process, as well as Ukraine.

These debates have acquired renewed urgency in the context of peace negotiations aimed at ending the war in Ukraine. As Ukraine's accession to the EU may be included among the terms of a settlement, the question has arisen as to whether the EU could depart from its merit-based approach and allow for an accelerated "reverse enlargement" by 2027, before all criteria have been fulfilled. However, such a possibility was rejected in COREPER in early March. In any case, any form of accelerated membership, even if partial or staged, would need to be extended to the other candidates.

2.3. Enlargement and security

Recent geopolitical developments have increased the **strategic importance of enlargement**. EU support to Ukraine and Moldova in the security domain is positively assessed, and there is growing momentum for developing a more autonomous European defence posture that could gradually integrate CCs. Accession is seen as a way that would make these countries more resilient to third-state interference, while **resilience-building** should be included in the enlargement toolbox.

Within the accession framework, CCs are required to align with the EU's CFSP under chapter 31, though this is less about domestic resilience than ensuring their external action alignment. The available tools within this policy can be extended to the CCs, through integration or intervention. In this respect, Ukraine has been integrated into the European Defence Industrial Programme and the Security Action for Europe instrument. It has also received significant support through the European Peace Facility and the EU Military Assistance Mission. However, such extensions remain limited in practice.

As the EU pays growing attention to security, the defence and security dimension that already exists within the EU's enlargement process could be strengthened. In this regard, specific measures could be adopted. These include adapting CSDP missions for deeper engagement and collaboration with CCs in cyber defence

and crisis management, further [operationalising security and defence partnerships while integrating them into their own frameworks.](#)

2.4.   Economic integration

Economic integration tools are generally seen as successful instruments. Capacity-building initiatives, financial assistance, and growth plans have delivered tangible results, even though the involvement of businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, could be expanded. Examples such as integration into SEPA payment systems and the abolition of roaming charges demonstrate clear benefits for citizens and businesses. **Gradual integration** into the internal market is regarded as a **major incentive for reform**, especially in Austria and France.

However, concerns remain. For some, gradual integration may reduce incentives for reforms if benefits are granted prematurely, which may hinder deeper political reforms. Others fear that it might [distort the functioning of the single market](#). Some sectors—particularly agriculture and cohesion funding—remain politically sensitive in the EU, especially in France and Poland. Crucially, as was stressed by Estonian and Polish respondents, gradual integration could also lead to a **"Europe à la carte"** model or create second-tier membership perceptions.

While recognising the achievements of economic integration, several MS, notably France and Germany, note that the economic and technocratic dimension of enlargement often overshadows the **political and democratic objectives** of the process.

2.5.   Democratic governance

Conditionality and Democratic Reform

[Prioritising democratic benchmarks](#) in the enlargement process is broadly recognised as crucial for the next accession rounds. When consistently applied, financial conditionality is considered a valuable tool for safeguarding democratic standards. However, enforcing **deep democratic reforms** remains challenging. This was identified as a major issue in the next enlargement rounds, especially in Germany and the Netherlands.

Key problems include limited political will in some CCs, as underlined in Estonia, and, from the EU's side, the weak credibility of rewards when the accession timeline appears uncertain. Other problems include the insufficient or inconsistent use of conditionality and other existing enforcement tools, as stressed by German and French respondents, especially where strategic interests prevail. Considerations related to regional cooperation and neighbourly relations, encapsulated in the so-called 'balancing clauses', "[seem to be applied to the detriment of the very fundamentals the EU professes to uphold](#)".

MS diverge on how to address these challenges. Some, for instance Austria and the Netherlands, favour **stricter enforcement of conditionality**, while others, such as France, prefer **maintaining incentives** and avoiding excessive political pressure.

Civil Society

Support for civil society organisations is widely recognised as **essential**. Instruments such as the Democracy Shield, civil society strategies, and the European Endowment for Democracy are seen as valuable mechanisms for supporting pro-democratic actors. [Channelling funds not only into state institutions](), which may be vulnerable to state capture by governing political parties, but also directly into independent civil society organisations and pro-democratic actors, appears critical in a context marked by external political interference by putting greater [emphasis on grassroots resilience]().

Nevertheless, gaps remain. In cases of **severe democratic backsliding**, the EU lacks effective tools to respond to domestic demands for reform, as seen in contexts such as [Serbia]() or [Georgia]().

Overall, there is a growing recognition of the need to **bring the political back into the enlargement debate**, linking it more clearly to the EU's broader democratic project. This was especially stressed by French and German respondents.

3. POLICY OPTIONS

Analyses of MS perceptions point to several options for new or revised approaches to enlargement across the areas previously discussed. These options can be broadly summed up as follows: towards defence integration; more economic benefits and stronger monitoring; strengthening democratic standards; and fostering ownership of the enlargement project.

3.1. Towards defence integration

Strengthening the security dimension of enlargement has become increasingly central in the current geopolitical environment. In the short term the EU could stress the need for **stricter alignment with the CFSP/CSDP** and expand **flexible cooperation frameworks** with CCs, such as a coalition of the willing, in order to enable operational coordination in areas such as defence support, resilience, and crisis response. Such arrangements should serve as complementary mechanisms that accompany, rather than replace, the formal accession process.

Another avenue for strengthening security integration involves **incorporating defence-related benchmarks** into the accession process itself. These could address both defence-industrial capacity and the resilience of state security institutions, ensuring that CC security structures are sufficiently protected from external interference and aligned with European standards.

At the same time, institutionalised cooperation in **countering hybrid threats, cyberattacks, and FIMI** could be developed and deepened. Existing initiatives, such as the EU Cybersecurity Reserve, could be expanded and applied more consistently across CCs, allowing them to participate more actively in programmes dedicated to cybersecurity and resilience. This cooperation should also be conceived as a two-way process: the EU can draw lessons from CC experiences, particularly in areas such as cyber defence, electoral resilience, and responses to external interference. Many respondents mentioned the 2025 Moldovan parliamentary elections as a success story of cooperation in countering interference, pointing out that the EU could learn from it, in addition to learning from Ukraine in terms of resilience and security.

In the longer term, enlargement policy could contribute to the development of a stronger European security posture by gradually integrating CCs into a more **autonomous European defence framework**. Such an approach could form part of a broader effort to strengthen the EU's role as a security actor, while ensuring close coordination with existing alliances, such as NATO, is regarded as critical in Poland and Estonia.

3.2. More economic benefits, stronger monitoring

The gradual economic integration of CCs into the EU's internal market remains a central pillar of enlargement policy and could be further developed in the short term. **Expanding sectoral integration** beyond the existing examples of roaming and participation in the Single Euro Payments Area – for instance, in the transport, phytosanitary and food sectors – would allow citizens and businesses in CCs to experience more immediate and visible benefits from the accession process. Deeper integration could involve participation in additional EU agencies, programmes and regulatory frameworks, provided that it remains closely linked to progress on fundamental reforms. Strengthening the visibility of these benefits would be particularly important in reinforcing public support for the enlargement process both within the EU and in CCs.

At the same time, gradual integration should be designed in a way that preserves strong incentives for continued reform. More ambitious forms of economic integration, potentially including **partial access to EU budgetary instruments or cohesion policy funds**, could provide powerful incentives, but they would need to be accompanied by **robust monitoring mechanisms** to avoid reform stagnation or backsliding. Alongside these measures, the EU could reinforce **screening mechanisms for strategic investments** in infrastructure and digital technologies to mitigate risks associated with foreign influence. Expanding connectivity initiatives, including infrastructure development, interconnections and cross-border networks, could further support regional integration and economic convergence while strengthening the resilience of candidate economies within the broader European market.

3.3. Strengthening democratic standards: conditionality and democratic actors

Ensuring democratic resilience remains one of the most challenging aspects of the enlargement process. Strengthening the credibility of rule-of-law conditionality will require more consistent use of existing tools, particularly **financial conditionality** and mechanisms allowing the **suspension of integration benefits** in cases where fundamental principles are not respected. EU support for strengthening socio-economic resilience, for instance, by ensuring access to long-term funding mechanisms or fast-tracking integration of CCs into EU energy policies, could also be more closely linked to the adoption and respect for democratic norms.

Addressing democratic backsliding should also be considered not only in the pre-accession phase but across the entire EU framework, including for existing MS. Extending or adapting mechanisms that safeguard the rule of law across both current and future members could enhance the overall credibility of the EU's democratic standards and reduce the risk of internal destabilisation following enlargement.

Parliamentary engagement represents another important avenue for reinforcing democratic governance. The European Parliament could play a stronger role in monitoring reforms in candidate countries, while

cooperation with national parliaments could support institutional capacity-building and democratic accountability. Engagement between CC representatives and European political parties may also contribute to deeper political integration during the accession process.

At the same time, **support for civil society organisations** remains critical to [boosting societal resilience](#), especially in rural areas. Existing instruments should be strengthened to ensure that civil society actors can continue to promote democratic reforms and public accountability, while avoiding excessive dependence on EU funding and preserving the autonomy of local actors. When governments impose restrictions on foreign funding for civil society organisations, international donors may need to rely on indirect support mechanisms (e.g., offering fellowships to individuals, creating affiliated organisations outside the target country, or working through international and intergovernmental organisations).

3.4. Fostering ownership of the enlargement project

Ultimately, the effectiveness of enlargement will depend on strengthening its political governance and societal legitimacy.

A **clearer political narrative** is needed to move beyond a purely technical presentation of accession negotiations and articulate enlargement as a shared European project that addresses both the interests of current member states and the aspirations of candidate countries. Such narrative also requires a more inclusive communication strategy, with due attention being paid to ownership by a broad range of actors beyond the "Brussels bubble".

Support for this political narrative needs to be built over the long-term. This requires **engaging more directly with European societies** about the strategic rationale and long-term benefits of enlargement. Education initiatives, exchanges, and people-to-people programmes could help foster stronger human connections between the EU and CCs, thereby reinforcing the societal foundations of integration.

Improving coordination among political actors within the EU could also contribute to strengthening the governance of enlargement. Closer interaction between national parliamentarians and MEPs may enhance the consistency of political messaging and facilitate broader political ownership of enlargement policy. Some MS (e.g., Austria) have also proposed **mentorship or sponsorship arrangements** in which individual EU countries provide sustained political and technical support to CCs throughout the accession process. Such arrangements could strengthen reform capacity while also fostering deeper bilateral partnerships.

Finally, the prospect of a larger Union raises questions about **institutional adaptation and decision-making procedures**. While debates on these issues are ongoing, a more inclusive approach could involve CCs more closely in discussions about the EU's future institutional architecture. Close cooperation on these issues would allow both sides to test solutions and coordinate reforms of institutional structures and decision-making processes. Allowing them to contribute to debates on internal reforms would not only acknowledge their stake in the future Union but could also strengthen the legitimacy and sustainability of enlargement as a long-term political project.

4. CONCLUSION

The renewed momentum behind EU enlargement reflects both a strategic necessity and a complex political challenge. While there is broad agreement on the importance of integrating candidate countries from the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood, the pathway forward remains contested. The EU must strike a careful balance between accelerating accession in response to geopolitical pressures and preserving the credibility of its merit-based framework, particularly regarding rule of law and democratic standards. Diverging Member State preferences, institutional constraints, and concerns about internal EU readiness further complicate this process. As a result, enlargement can no longer be treated as a purely technical exercise but must be approached as a deeply political project requiring coordinated reforms on both sides.

As enlargement has acquired renewed strategic importance against the backdrop of Russia's war in Ukraine and a volatile environment marked by hybrid threats, it has become essential to further integrate defence and security dimensions into the accession process. These are closely intertwined with the economic and democratic dimensions. CCs should be granted more substantial benefits across key sectors, accompanied by robust monitoring mechanisms to safeguard against external interference and ensure compliance with democratic principles. Ultimately, reasserting the democratic and political dimensions of enlargement is critical. This entails engaging political actors and societies in both MS and CCs, in order to strengthen the legitimacy and credibility of enlargement as a shared political project.

ANNEX

Interlocutors by sector
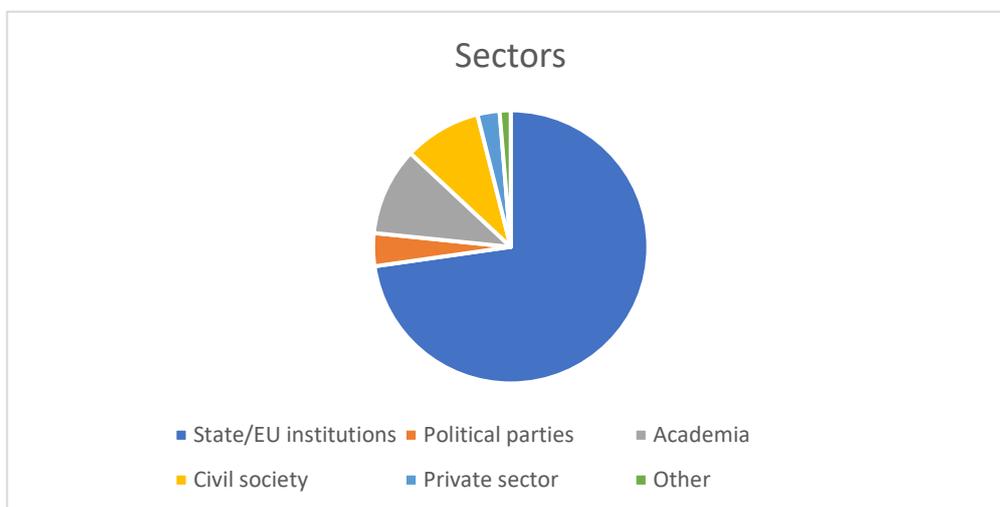
Interlocutors by country and sector

Country	State/EU institutions	Academia	Civil society	Political parties	Private sector	Other	Total
France	11						11
Germany	5	1	3	3			12
The Netherlands	5	2	2		1		10
Austria	6	3	1				10
Poland	10	1	1				12
Estonia	9	1					10
EU	10				1	1	12
Total	55	8	7	3	2	2	77

Interlocutors by gender

Country	Men	Women	Total
France	9	2	11
Germany	10	2	12
The Netherlands	5	5	10
Austria	7	3	10

Poland	9	3	12
Estonia	7	3	10
EU	6	6	12
Total	53	24	77