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### The European Council needs to shift the debate to the benefits of new accession steps and EU reform

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The December European Council may grant the opening of EU accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova. Most European leaders agree that the EU is morally obliged to support the EU perspective of countries that are clearly defending our values. A realisation has moreover kicked in that the countries in the Western Balkans cannot be kept in the EU waiting room forever and need to be offered membership perspective too. This in turn has prompted an urgent debate on how the EU should internally reform to be 'FitFor30+', something overdue according to some, but a non-starter for others.

For the Netherlands, this is particularly the case, as we outlined in a recent [Clingendael policy brief](#). For the past years, the debate has concentrated on rule of law backsliding in countries that joined the EU in the 'Big Bang' 2004/07 rounds. Countries of the Western Balkans are associated with organised crime, love for Putin and internal strife. A bigger EU is not automatically considered a stronger EU and the idea of talks on EU reform potentially spiralling over into negotiations on treaty change is considered a worst-case scenario. Despite the current reverse towards slightly [more support for enlargement among the Dutch population](#), no-votes to the EU's Constitutional Treaty in 2005 and an EU Association Agreement with Ukraine in 2016 are still fresh memories. While it is too early to speculate on the outcomes of coalition negotiations, last week's election results may lead to another Dutch reverse, namely one towards less enlargement support. It is feared that it will be easy to mobilise opposition towards both EU enlargement and reform, while some politicians are calling for a mandatory binding referendum before new enlargement rounds.

Discussions are lacking arguments beyond the geopolitical imperative to enlarge and reform. What can current EU Member States gain when neighbouring countries grow closer to the EU, either by taking steps in a staged accession or by becoming a full member? Benefits of new countries joining could include their space to generate renewable energy, their potential for becoming alternative producers of goods and suppliers of resources ('friendshoring'), their relatively cheap workforce, etc. These countries could be considered a fantastic investment opportunity, particularly when becoming EU Member States.

Benefits can also be foreseen for the EU and for EU citizens at large. Faced with a growing global autocratic axis, enlargement could boost much needed EU clout on the world stage, turning it into a green economic and agricultural superpower. The enlargement model with its emphasis on adherence to democratic values and rule of law can be considered a benign alternative to great powers demanding smaller countries to fall in line with their

interests, indebt them or back their autocratic leadership. Many of the countries that have joined the EU in the past 20 years have bloomed economically and most of them are also relatively stable democracies. For those EU Member States where free press, an independent judiciary and other basic rule of law elements are not safeguarded, new instruments could be considered to exclude them from EU funding and decision-making capacity.

Reform of the EU could help to make it more lean and mean and increase its link to citizens and their concerns. The Brussels bubble oftentimes seems rather detached, whereas an effective democracy should remain close to its electorate. Decreasing the Brussels democratic deficit would increase the visibility and credibility in the democratic processes of the Union as a whole.

Reform of the EU's budget with less agricultural spending, QMV in the field of foreign policy and internal budget shifts, a smaller European Commission, EP and EU Council bodies, EU competences in the field of energy, health, defence industry and migration could all make the EU stronger in the face of intensified geopolitical competition.

Countries concerned about the risks of enlargement could be met halfway by increasing the use of conditionality in EU budgets and by making any accession approach reversible. That way, rule of law reform and sticking to agreed standards could actually be enforced.

In its progress reports, the European Commission could be more direct in calling a spade a spade when it comes to rent-seeking and ethno-nationalist politics in the Western Balkans. This should revive the EU's transformative role and convince countries like the Netherlands that the EU will not be weakened from within as rule of law backsliding will simply not be accepted.

Most important will be to shift the debate to the benefits of new accession steps and EU reform. Only this will increase the chance of rendering crucial support from citizens in the Member States. Such benefits are numerous, but not talked about enough. There is a clear task for the December European Council to take bold steps on enlargement, set a clear path forward for EU internal reform and to take EU citizens along in this process.