

Beyond the EU enlargement paradox

Optimising opportunities
and minimising risks

Clingendael Report

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March 2024

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* The authors would like to thank Camille van Hees, Adriaan Schout and Wouter Zweers for their input.

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Executive summary

This Clingendael report analyses the so-called ‘EU enlargement paradox’, which refers to the notion that EU enlargement is both inevitable and impossible at the same time. It is inevitable for geostrategic reasons, given Putin’s Russian imperial revisionism. But at the same time, EU enlargement is impossible for political-institutional reasons. At the moment, neither the eligible candidate countries, nor the EU at large, nor the electorates in key EU Member States are ‘enlargement-fit’. How could the Dutch government deal with this paradox? This paper aims to set the scene for the forthcoming debate in the Netherlands on the future of EU enlargement. To serve as a basis for risk analysis, it provides a systematic overview of various trade-offs on five policy domains: 1) geopolitics, security and defence; 2) rule of law and democracy; 3) economy and budget; 4) migration and free movement of persons; and 5) EU institutional structure. The report draws on findings from the latest *Clingendael Barometer* survey, which analysed Dutch public opinion towards enlargement along these dimensions.

The geopolitical argument in favour of enlargement has become increasingly pressing after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In particular, the accession of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is regarded as essential in order to pull these countries out of Russian neo-imperialist influence. Through enlargement, the EU could, potentially, enhance its role as geopolitical player and strengthen its position within the transatlantic relationship. At the same time, enlargement comes with geostrategic risks, such as the risk of importing armed conflict and the greater military vulnerability of the EU borders.

And while candidate preparation for accession to the EU has historically provided an important incentive for rule of law and democratic reforms, the EU could put itself at risk if it allowed countries to join that retain illiberal democratic features or have not yet consolidated reforms. Concern about the rule of law is a major reason for public hesitation about EU enlargement. Currently, only the accession of Ukraine is supported by a majority of the Dutch public. That is not the case for the other candidate countries. A too-hasty enlargement process without considering public support and concerns could undermine the EU as a Value Community, the fundamentals on which the EU is built, and the democratic stability in existing Member States.

An important argument in favour of further EU enlargement is that this would lead to enhanced economic opportunities and increased EU competitiveness. And, indeed, Ukraine in particular could be an important producer of hydropower in Europe. Its agricultural industry is one of the largest in the world. Its integration into the internal market would dramatically increase EU food security. Moreover, Ukraine's thriving IT sector could help to accelerate the digital transition. However, when the EU enlarges with countries that, for example, still face high levels of corruption and economic mismanagement, it could diminish the EU's global competitiveness and its capacity to act. Moreover, it will put pressure on the EU budget and have huge distributional implications, in particular for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and cohesion policy.

Dutch public concerns about the next round of EU expansion are to a great extent grounded in concerns about migration and the free movement of people. While the forecast of EU accession provides a clear incentive for candidate countries to align to the EU *acquis*, most of them still lag behind. A too-hasty enlargement therefore would risk the security of the EU's external border and could make the EU more vulnerable to the instrumentalization of migration by autocratic opponents. Other risks are associated with a too-rapid opening of the labour markets, a concern shared broadly by the Dutch public.

Finally, EU enlargement would require the EU to reform itself – notably the way in which decisions are made, as well as the distribution of power between Member States. Governing with 27 is already difficult, but with many more Member States, the EU's institutional set-up is considered no longer fit for purpose. The Dutch public shares such concerns about the EU's decisiveness and capacity to act. At the same time, EU reform will be a lengthy process, with diverging interests and many veto-players along the way.

Ensuring that candidate countries, the EU itself and European electorates are ready for enlargement will require time, something that the current geopolitical context does not appear to allow. Yet, speeding up this process while not taking into account the enlargement concerns of the public could easily backfire in an already-fragile political context.

It is recommended that the (new) Dutch government develops a broad EU Enlargement and Reform Agenda, consisting of a priority list for intra-EU reforms, adherence to the 'strict, fair and engaged' accession approach for candidate countries, and – above all – a domestic agenda for consulting and engaging the public on enlargement consequences and trade-offs at an early stage to prevent presenting it with a (geo)political *fait accompli*.

1 Introduction

The Russian war against Ukraine has shaken up the geopolitical order in Europe. Moreover, it has put the enlargement of the European Union (EU) back on the political agenda. As emphasised during the European Council in December 2023, enlargement is seen as ‘a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity’.¹ For that reason, following the Russian invasion in February 2022, European leaders were quick to grant Ukraine, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina EU candidate status in 2022, while offering Georgia potential candidate status. One and a half years later, in December 2023, European leaders decided to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and to grant Georgia full candidate status.² In addition, the European Council reaffirmed its full and unequivocal commitment to the EU membership perspective of the Western Balkans and called for the acceleration of their accession process.

While the accession of the so-called ‘Eastern trio’ and the Western Balkans has become essentially inevitable in the current geopolitical context (and as a result of successive decisions made by the European Council), both the candidate countries and the EU itself are not ready for such a grand leap. There are concerns that candidate countries’ progress on fundamental dossiers – especially rule of law and democracy – is developing at too slow a pace. Absorbing countries that do not fully adhere to European values could – in turn – affect the stability of the Union as a whole, particularly as the EU itself does not yet have a fully functional toolbox to contain Member States that ‘backslide’ on those values. Furthermore, without drastic, but difficult, reforms the EU budget is at risk. Moreover, electorates in key founding Member States, like France, Germany and the Netherlands, are not conclusively supportive of EU enlargement, to put it mildly. Presenting electorates with a geopolitically motivated *fait accompli* may provoke Eurosceptic and radical right parties. The fact is that EU enlargement is both geopolitical and domestic, having an impact on both international security politics and also institutional and socioeconomic distribution questions within the EU.

1 European Council, “[European Council Conclusions](#),” 14-15 December 2023.

2 Ibid.

The current state of play could well be coined as ‘the enlargement paradox’: a new round (or several rounds) of EU enlargement is currently both inevitable and impossible at the same time. Preparing candidate countries, the EU itself and the European demos for enlargement will require effort and – above all – time. And time is exactly what the current geopolitical context does not seem to allow.

This ‘enlargement paradox’ has been guiding the position of the (outgoing) Dutch government towards EU enlargement. Both domestically and internationally, the government has been criticised for lacking geopolitical vision and a sense of urgency.³ Although at policy level the geostrategic necessity has surely kicked in, the official Dutch position – defined by the government itself as ‘*strict, fair and engaged*’ – underscores the belief that the accession process should remain merit-based and committed to applying the enlargement methodology. This approach was, for example, reflected in the position of the Dutch government in June 2019 to block the start of the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia (alongside France and Denmark), as rule of law reforms were considered insufficient. But in this approach also lies a dilemma, because such a merit-based approach de facto means that no exceptions can be made for geopolitical reasons.

In any case, the positioning of any future government – at the time of writing (early 2024) the cabinet formation in the Netherlands is ongoing – will be driven by a more enlargement-critical parliament after the 2023 elections and – above all – Dutch public opinion ambivalent towards EU enlargement. The latest *Clingendael Barometer* opinion survey – conducted in December 2023 – indicates that, although there was support among a large majority of respondents for the accession of Ukraine (74%), there seemed to be a general reluctance to support the accession of other candidate countries – most of whom have been candidates for much longer (see Box 1 and the Appendix). Overall, Dutch citizens do not seem to draw optimism from EU enlargement. In fact, out of all 43 ‘hopeful’ developments in the *Clingendael Barometer*, enlargement with

3 Camille van Hees, Louise van Schaik and Wouter Zweers, “[The Dutch Dragging Their Feet](#),” November 2023; Giselle Bosse, “Strict, Fair, Engaged.... And Still Without a Vision? A View from the Netherlands on EU Enlargement and Its Neighbourhood,” In: Kaeding, M., Pollak, J., Schmidt, P. (eds) (2023) *Enlargement and the Future of Europe*, Springer, pp. 115-119.

Ukraine was considered as the second-least hopeful development; enlargement with the Western Balkan countries as the least.⁴

Hence, in a context of an ambivalent political and public opinion, it will be more important than ever to arrive at a weighted Dutch positioning that addresses different concerns associated with enlargement. Ultimately, to move beyond the enlargement paradox, it is crucial to minimise the risks and optimise the opportunities, and develop a strategy for informing and involving the public. It requires political and policy debates to move from discussions about ‘if’ towards strategic discussions about ‘how’, and ‘under what conditions’. As expressed by the French president, Emmanuel Macron, in his much-quoted GLOBSEC speech in Bratislava last year: ‘the question is no longer whether we should enlarge – we answered that question a year ago – nor even when we should enlarge – [...] but rather how we should do it’.⁵

This report aims to contribute to this endeavour by providing an analytical overview of EU enlargement risks and benefits. The framework is developed on the basis of strategic workshops with policy makers and experts, as well as desk research and interviews. In particular, this report builds on previous work on EU enlargement conducted by the Clingendael Institute,⁶ the Franco-German working group of experts on EU institutional reform,⁷ and the Brussels Institute for Geopolitics.⁸ On top of that, in this report we make use exclusively of the results of the recent *Clingendael Barometer* survey (see the Appendix), in which the Dutch public was asked about EU enlargement and its consequences. The report predominantly focuses on the impact of the accession of eight candidate countries. This impact analysis does not fully elaborate on Turkey, due to the stagnation of accession talks, nor Kosovo, which is currently a potential candidate country.

4 The Clingendael Foreign Policy Barometer regularly taps international developments that the Dutch experience as either hopeful or threatening. See: Monika Sie Dhian Ho, Mark Elchardus, Christopher Houtkamp and Teun van der Laan, “[Tussen Hoop en Vrees](#),” February 2024.

5 Emmanuel Macron, “[GLOBSEC 2023: Strong and tangible security guarantees are needed, Macron says](#),” 31 May 2023.

6 Camille van Hees, Louise van Schaik and Wouter Zweers, “[The Dutch Dragging Their Feet](#),” November 2023.

7 German-Franco Working Group on EU Reforms, “[Sailing on High Seas – Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century](#),” 18 September 2023.

8 Hans Kribbe and Luuk van Middelaar, “[Preparing for the next EU enlargement: tough choices ahead](#),” September 2023. See also: Rene Cuperus, “7 Mythen über Europa. Pläydoyer für ein vorsichtiges Europa,” Bonn, 2021.

The analytical framework includes five policy domains: 1) geopolitics, security and defence; 2) rule of law and democracy; 3) economy and budget; 4) migration and the free movement of persons; and 5) EU institutional structure.⁹ On each dimension, we analyse opportunities and risks, thereby specifically addressing the interests of the Netherlands and against the backdrop of public opinion. The paper does not aim to be conclusive: EU enlargement entails difficult trade-offs that ultimately can only be settled politically and with compromises. Nevertheless, the paper aims to contribute to a more comprehensive risk analysis to guide the Dutch strategic position in the future enlargement debate and to identify ingredients for a political strategy that incorporates enlargement concerns among the Dutch population.

⁹ See also: Tweede Kamer, “Geannoteerde agenda van de Europese Politieke Gemeenschap en de informele Europese Raad van 5 en 6 oktober 2023, vergaderjaar 2023–2024, kamerstuk 21 501-20, nr. 1973.

2 Opportunities and risks on five policy dimensions

The ‘enlargement paradox’ yields the crucial question of how to strike the right balance between the benefits of EU enlargement and the risks with regard to crucial policy areas. Particularly since February 2022, several European leaders and experts have emphasised the various benefits of a new round of EU enlargement. Many see enlargement not only as a geopolitical necessity to protect European countries against Russian revisionism but also as a great opportunity to reform the EU. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in her statement on the *2023 Enlargement Package* and the new *Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*: ‘Enlargement is a vital policy for the European Union. Completing our Union is the call of history, the natural horizon of our Union. Completing our Union, also has a strong economic and geopolitical logic. Past enlargements have shown the enormous benefits both for the accession countries and the EU. We all win.’¹⁰ This is underscored by Italian EU expert at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Nathalie Tocci, who stressed that ‘deepening happens because widening is necessary. The imperative of enlargement provides the catalyst to reform.’¹¹ Enlargement is also presented as a momentum to relaunch a political debate on previous reform proposals, for example regarding the EU budget or the use of qualified majority voting (QMV) on (elements of) the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

In the same vein, it is argued that enlargement could increase the EU’s economic and military clout, making it a geopolitical actor that could help shape its neighbouring sphere of influence. This has, for example, been expressed again by Chancellor Scholz: ‘A united Europe of 27, 30, 36 states, with then more than 500 million free and equal citizens, can bring its weight to bear even more strongly in this world.’ High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell

10 Ursula von der Leyen’s [statement](#) on the *2023 Enlargement Package* and the new *Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*, 8 November 2023. See also: PES, “[Chancellor Scholz’s vision for bigger, more coherent EU must inspire change](#),” PES Congress-speech Malaga, 15 October 2022. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated in this speech that: ‘A bigger EU is a reformed EU.’

11 Nathalie Tocci, “[The Enlargement and Reform Conundrum](#),” *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 28 September 2023.

expressed himself in the same way in his statement on the 2023 Enlargement Package: ‘This is a historic Enlargement Package, for the first time with our ten closest partners lined up for EU membership. Completing our Union is the best investment in peace, security and prosperity for our continent and this year’s package sets out major steps forward. EU membership is a strategic choice and alignment with the EU’s common foreign and security policy is a more significant signal than ever of shared values and strategic orientation.’¹²

Enlargement, in this sense, could boost European sovereignty and capacity to act as a geostrategic player. Some advocate a big leap forward towards a ‘wider and deeper EU’: a simultaneously more enlarged and more centralised and federalised Union, necessary to tackle current geopolitical challenges.¹³ For example, former prime minister and president of the European Central Bank (ECB), Mario Draghi, even stated that the EU is at a ‘critical juncture’ and must now become a state.¹⁴

However, despite these associated benefits, there are clear political risks associated with EU enlargement. These lie for example in the EU’s current lack of absorption power, for example when it comes to its budget and institutional set-up. A pressing issue is the highly ambivalent and critical public attitude towards EU enlargement, against the background of the increasing electoral success of Eurosceptic and radical right parties within Western democracies. Such ambivalence can also be found among the Dutch public. The abovementioned *Clingendael Barometer* survey indicates that the geopolitical narrative in favour of enlargement does not find unequivocal resonance among the Dutch population. The results of the survey are briefly summarised in Box 1 and presented in full in the Appendix.

12 European Commission Press Release, ‘[Commission adopts 2023 Enlargement package, recommends to open negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, to grant candidate status to Georgia and to open accession negotiations with BiH, once the necessary degree of compliance is achieved](#)’, Brussels, 8 November 2023.

13 Piotr Buras and Engjellushe Morina, ‘[Catch-27: The contradictory thinking about enlargement in the EU](#),’ ECFR Policy Brief, 23 November 2023.

14 Frederica Pascale, ‘[Draghi: EU must become a state](#),’ Euractiv, 1 December 2023.

Box 1 The Clingendael Barometer Survey: the outcomes regarding EU enlargement¹⁵

Table 1 Dutch support for EU enlargement*

Ukraine	74%
North Macedonia	49%
Montenegro	48%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	47%
Moldova	45%
Albania	42%
Serbia	42%
Kosovo	41%
Georgia	37%
Turkey	27%

* % of respondents in favour of the country's EU accession (if country meets accession criteria).

The data from the Clingendael Barometer (for which fieldwork was conducted in December 2023, see also the Appendix) show that public opinion in the Netherlands, in general, remains rather lukewarm toward EU enlargement. A substantial effect of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is clearly visible – support for EU accession of Ukraine was relatively high (74% of respondents for, 26% against), the highest of all (potential) candidate countries. But in the case of the Western Balkan countries, whose accession has also returned high on the Brussels agenda, Dutch hesitations about accession remain sharply delineated. For Serbia, Albania and Kosovo, roughly 40% of respondents were in favour of these countries' accession to the EU, while a relatively large majority of around 60% opposed their accession. Support for the accession of Northern Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro is around 50%. Positions towards the accession of Moldova and Georgia, which applied for EU membership alongside Ukraine, were also ambivalent. Only 45% of respondents supported the EU accession of Moldova; with a majority of 55% rejecting it. For Georgia, support is even lower – roughly 37%; with 63% rejecting it. Significantly lowest support is found for the accession of Turkey: 27% of respondents were in support of the accession of Turkey, while a large majority (73%) of respondents were opposed to Turkish EU accession.

15 The authors would like to thank Christopher Houtkamp, Teun van der Laan, Monika Sie Dhian Ho and Mark Elchardus for conducting the fieldwork for this survey.

With regard to arguments that would be decisive for EU enlargement in the view of those surveyed, the following picture emerges from the Barometer data:

- ‘Increasing security and stability in Europe’ was seen as the most decisive argument for EU enlargement (72%).
- Followed in second place by ‘countering influence from China and Russia, among others’ (62%).
- ‘More labour force that can come to the Netherlands as part of the free movement of people’ is not seen as a pro argument; on the contrary, 87% rejected this as an argument for enlargement)
- To a slightly lesser extent, the same applies to ‘Greater opportunities for Dutch businesses’: 64% rejected this as an argument for enlargement.

Arguments against EU enlargement include:

- ‘internal divisions within the EU are increased, making the EU no longer decisive’ (65%).
- ‘EU enlargement leads to large-scale migration to the Netherlands from the new Member States’ led to a near 50-50% result.
- The same goes for: ‘The net contribution of the Netherlands to the European Union is increasing’
- 40% thought the argument ‘The influence of the Netherlands in the European Union decreases’ was a decisive argument against EU enlargement
- 55% mentioned as an argument against: ‘Their membership increases the risk of the Union being involved in armed conflict.’

The question of whether the rule of unanimity should be abolished in foreign and security policy decisions in the European Union was clearly answered in the affirmative: 58% agreed.

The results from the *Clingendael Barometer* indicate ambivalent public opinion about EU enlargement. On the one hand, we see increased geopolitical awareness (EU enlargement is necessary for EU security and stability in the face of Chinese and Russian influence) – hence the support for Ukraine and to a lesser extent Moldova. On the other hand, this geopolitical vigilance does not seem to spread to the Western Balkans. Here, significant reservations remain that relate to the criteria and conditions of EU accession.

Now that the debate on EU enlargement is taking off, many arguments for and against have been presented. Yet, they have not been outlined systematically with a specific focus on Dutch interests and against the backdrop of public opinion. To contribute to such an analysis, we map perceived opportunities and risks of EU enlargement in an analytical framework that includes five policy dimensions:

1. geopolitics, security and defence
2. rule of law and democracy
3. economy and budget
4. migration and the free movement of persons
5. institutional structure

These five dimensions largely coincide with the six dimensions identified by the (outgoing) Dutch government as key impact dimensions, with the exception that we discuss the consequences for the EU budget and internal market in conjunction under the domain 'economy and budget'.¹⁶ They also coincide with the five dimensions identified by the Brussels Institute for Geopolitics,¹⁷ with the exception that we add 'migration' as separate dimension, as this is a key policy dimension for the Netherlands and of crucial importance in light of future enlargement. In Table 2, a schematic overview is provided of key opportunities and risks of EU enlargement on all five dimensions. In the remainder of this paper, these are explained and discussed in more detail. In the analysis, we pay attention to three key factors: the situation in the candidate countries; the condition of the EU itself; and political support and public opinion support in the Netherlands. The aim is to provide elements for a Dutch political strategy that is capable of dealing with the risks and opportunities of EU enlargement.

16 Tweede Kamer, "Geannoteerde agenda van de Europese Politieke Gemeenschap en de informele Europese Raad van 5 en 6 oktober 2023, vergaderjaar 2023–2024, kamerstuk 21 501-20, nr. 1973.

17 Hans Kribbe and Luuk van Middelaar, "[Preparing for the next EU enlargement: tough choices ahead](#)," September 2023.

Table 2 Key EU enlargement opportunities and risks on five policy dimensions

	Opportunities	Risks
Geopolitics, security and defence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Guaranteeing security in Europe in the face of autocratic threats ✓ Pursuing the EU's role as a geopolitical actor ✓ Strengthening the transatlantic relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Greater military vulnerability of EU borders ✓ Import of conflicts on EU territory ✓ Risk of incorporating 'Trojan Horses': i.e., countries still under autocratic influence of Russia or China ✓ Inward-looking enlargement technocracy
Rule of law and democracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Incentive for rule of law and democracy reforms in candidate countries ✓ Incentive for EU (treaty) reforms that strengthen the rule of law in the EU 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Backsliding in countries after joining EU ✓ Incorporation of democratic fragile countries could affect the stability of the EU as a whole ✓ Weakening of the European Value Community ✓ Enlargement backlash in a Eurosceptic Europe
Economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Expansion of single market ✓ Incorporation of resource- and CRM-rich countries ✓ Incentive to modernise the EU budget and make it more flexible to current challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Incorporation of poor regions puts pressure on cohesion funds ✓ Incorporation of poor and indebted countries could erode support in the Northern Member States ✓ Disagreements over agriculture and budget could divide the Union
Migration and free movement of persons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Incentive for candidate countries to bring national legislation in line with the EU acquis ✓ Enhanced cooperation with so-called 'transit countries' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Social costs of labour migration from new Member States ✓ Enlarged Union will make agreement on and implementation of the Migration & Asylum Pact more difficult
Institutional structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Enlargement as a boost for a better organised EU, in terms of form and institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Diminishing power of smaller Member States like the Netherlands ✓ Eastward power shift within the EU could bring the Franco-German axis out of balance ✓ Decline of decisiveness in the EU

3 Geopolitics, security and defence

While EU enlargement has always been motivated by geopolitical concerns, the geopolitical argument has become more and more pressing since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The security situation in Europe has undergone a shock, which has been given big names such as the *Zeitenwende* by Olaf Scholz, or *tournant historique* by French President Emmanuel Macron.¹⁸ The rapid call for NATO membership by formerly neutral countries Finland and Sweden is exemplary of this shock. Feeling threatened by, and unprotected against, Russian expansionism, these countries are now consciously opting for more formalised integration into the Euro-Atlantic community. Similar security and protection logics affect other countries on the border of a revisionist Russia, particularly if they were part of the old Soviet Union territory. This ultimately applies to Ukraine, but also to Moldova and Georgia. These countries, by way of containment, see an absolute need to be included in NATO and the EU for their military and economic security. Yet the potential accession to the EU of these countries, as well as the Western Balkans, carries both geopolitical opportunities and risks.

Opportunities

The accession of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia is regarded as essential in order to pull these countries out of Russian neo-imperialist influence. The current geopolitical momentum resembles that of 2004 – when the EU was enlarged with eight Central and Eastern European countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia) plus Cyprus and Malta. In 2007, Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU, followed by Croatia in 2013. The accession of the Central and Eastern European countries offered them – once and for all – a welcome to the European family and peace and stability on the continent after two world wars and decades of Soviet occupation. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the geopolitical urgency to absorb Ukraine into the

18 The Economist. "[France's foreign-policy revolution](#)," 20 July 2023.

EU has, arguably, become a key task for the EU. The same applies to Moldova and Georgia as both are also seriously threatened by Russia.

For the Western Balkans, the geopolitical argument seems less pressing at first sight. Although the Western Balkans are not a key priority for Russian revisionism, research by the Clingendael Institute has indicated that ‘Russia nevertheless pursues several objectives in the region as part of its global geopolitical ambitions.’¹⁹ Also China’s increased influence in the Western Balkans is seen by EU experts and policy makers as an important reason to speed up their EU accession process, in order to guarantee stability in the region and, hence, on the European continent.

Moreover, for the EU itself, enlargement could enhance the Union’s credibility as a geopolitical actor. A greater EU bloc would ensure Europe’s security against autocratic threats and potentially strengthen the European pillar within transatlantic relations. An enlarged EU would have more army units at its disposal, more (rare) resources and critical raw materials (CRMs), and in principle, a larger GDP and budget. The geopolitical footprint of the EU in the evolving multipolar world order could become larger.

Risks

From a geopolitical perspective, enlargement also entails risks. With opening accession talks with Ukraine, the EU is taking on a huge responsibility to include a country that is currently still at war. This is a big gamble because it enhances the military vulnerability of a Union that is by far not ready to carry its own military weight.²⁰ Also, among the other EU candidates are countries that continue to experience ethno-nationalistic conflict as well as Russian and/or Chinese influence. They are often countries without a proven democratic tradition or with a different geopolitical orientation. The most obvious example is Serbia. This

19 Wouter Zweers, Niels Drost and Baptiste Henry, “[Little substance, considerable impact: Russian influence in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro](#),” Clingendael Report, August 2023. Wouter Zweers, Vladimir Shopov, Frans-Paul van der Putten, Mirela Petkova and Maarten Lemstra, “China and the EU in the Western Balkans”, Clingendael Report, August 2020.

20 Complicated in this context is also the meaning and scope of Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union, which theoretically provides a security guarantee similar to NATO’s Article 5 on mutual defence.

country currently pursues a geopolitical course different to European strategic interests and is far from full alignment with the 'EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy', and may therefore even constitute a 'Trojan horse' within the EU.²¹ Hence, by incorporating these countries, the Union also risks incorporating existing conflicts and potential foreign interventions.

Moreover, EU enlargement – especially with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – bears a complication for NATO. In the EU's 2004 'Big Bang Enlargement', the new Member States first joined NATO (a much simpler procedure than years of EU accession negotiations) and then the EU. Today, it is unclear when NATO membership will come into the picture for the current candidate countries that are not yet NATO members, especially Ukraine. At the NATO summit in Vilnius in July 2023, the final summit communiqué stated that while 'Ukraine's future is in NATO', the alliance would only 'extend an invitation to Ukraine' when Kyiv had completed certain 'democratic and security sector reforms'. The communiqué's language reflects opposition from Germany and the US that a too-firm commitment could prompt an escalation from [Russia](#) and, if Ukraine was allowed to join the alliance while the conflict continued, it could ultimately bring NATO into a war against Moscow.²²

Finally, there is a risk that the EU, eager to see itself as a geopolitical actor on the world stage, will become highly inward looking as a result of the debate on enlargement and reform, obsessively concerned with the number of commissioners, the number of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and voting weights, while autocratic threats increase and Europe's global competitiveness weakens.²³

21 Harun Cero and Arlinda Rustemi, "[Lesson from Ukraine: Stop Appeasing Russia's Trojan Horse, Serbia](#)", *Balkan Insight*, 5 April 2022.

22 Dan Sabbagh, "[Zelensky fails in effort to secure invitation to join NATO at Vilnius summit](#)," *The Guardian*, 11 July 2023.

23 See for this argument: Xavier Devictor, "[Are we too inward-looking?](#)," The World Bank, opinion, 3 June 2014; R. Nicholas Burns, Damon Wilson and Jeff Lightfoot, "[The danger of an inward-looking Europe](#)," *The New Atlanticist*, 17 July 2012.

Dutch public opinion

The dilemma of balancing the geopolitical necessity of enlargement against its security risks is also represented in Dutch public opinion. According to the recent *Clingendael Barometer* survey (see Box 1), roughly 72% of respondents considered 'increasing security and stability in Europe' a decisive argument in favour of enlargement. In addition, a majority of 63% perceived 'countering the influence of China and Russia, among others, in Europe' as a decisive argument in favour of enlargement. Yet, at the same time, also a majority of roughly 55% perceived the risk of the Union becoming involved in an armed conflict as a decisive argument against enlargement. Moreover, although the geopolitical argument seems important to the Dutch public, it does not outweigh the terms of accession. Only slightly more than 18% of respondents agreed or totally agreed with the statement that membership should be possible even without meeting any of the accession conditions if this serves the Union's security or international influence.²⁴

24 This is in line with the results of earlier Dutch public opinion research: Josje den Ridder and Maja Djundeva, "[Kennisnotitie De publieke opinie over uitbreiding van de Europese Unie](#)", *Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau* (SCP), 9 June 2022.

4 Rule of law and democracy

Adherence to principles of rule of law and democracy is one of the key political EU accession criteria, as agreed in Copenhagen in 1993. They are non-negotiable and part of the so-called ‘Fundamentals cluster’, which is the first to open and the last to close in the accession negotiations.²⁵ These principles are enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), which states that: ‘The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.’²⁶ Adherence to the rule of law by individual Member States is crucial for the functioning of the internal market, and hence, a key priority for an open economy like that of the Netherlands. EU enlargement offers an opportunity to strengthen and pursue the rule of law and democracy throughout the European continent, but there are also clear risks.

Opportunities

Enlargement offers momentum to evaluate and – possibly – reform the toolbox of instruments the Union has for pursuing the rule of law in its Member States.²⁷ Some of these instruments are provided for in the Union’s primary law. An example is Article 7 TEU (often simply referred to as ‘Article 7’), which entails a three-step procedure to suspend certain rights from a member state in case of serious breaches of the rule of law.²⁸ Recently, the EU has been increasingly relying on

25 European Commission, “[EU accession process: step by step](#)”, October 2022.

26 Treaty on European Union, [Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union - TITLE I COMMON PROVISIONS - Article 2](#).

27 See for an overview: European Commission, “[The EU rule of law toolbox](#)”, 20 July 2021.

28 Triggering Article 7 starts with 1) a proposal by either the EC, the EP or one-third of the Member States. The accused member state is then called to answer to the Council in a hearing, which may then decide – by a majority of four-fifths and after obtaining consent of the EP – to identify a clear risk of a serious breach of the Union’s founding values as prescribed in Article 2 TEU. If the Member State does not comply with the recommendations of the Council, the European Council can – on a proposal of one-third of the Member States or by the EC, and after consent of the EU – trigger the second stage (Article 7(2)) and determine that there is a ‘serious and persistent breach’. Once the European Council has unanimously determined a breach, the Council can then trigger the third stage (Article 7(3)) and decide by qualified majority to suspend certain rights of the member state in question.

economic governance instruments, provided for in secondary law, which imply the withholding of EU funds in case of rule of law backsliding. Examples are the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) – under which EU cohesion funds can be suspended if a country does not adhere to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights – and the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation – an instrument through which (among others) funds can be suspended where a country engages in rule of law breaches that affect the EU budget.²⁹

Currently, there is a debate among EU experts on whether these instruments are effective or need to be reformed. Critics point to rule of law violations in Hungary and Poland (see Box 2) and the difficulties faced by various EU institutions in effectively addressing these.³⁰ For example, it has been proven difficult to fully trigger Article 7, as this requires unanimity in the European Council. In addition, although significant funds have been frozen for Hungary, this has in itself become the subject of political negotiations on other issues in the European Council, notably Hungary's support for the financial aid package to Ukraine in December 2023 and February 2024. Moreover, the considerable number of overlapping instruments and the involvement of many services make the pallet of measures particularly complex to grasp, let alone be scrutinised by the European Parliament (EP).³¹

EU enlargement provides an incentive to critically assess the toolbox and to analyse the potential of reform proposals.³² Examples are the proposal to dismiss the unanimity requirement for triggering Article 7 and the extension of the Conditionality Regulation to structural breaches of the rule of law rather than only those that affect the EU budget. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse such reform proposals and their desirability. Yet importantly, most of such reform proposals are largely unrealistic in the current political context. In addition, rather than reforming the instruments altogether – which could risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater – there could be more value in strengthening the complementarity of different instruments and providing more procedural clarity.³³

29 For these and other instruments, European Commission, "[The EU rule of law toolbox](#)", 20 July 2021.

30 Luuk Molthof, Nienke van Heukelingen and Giulia Cretti, "[Exploring avenues in the EU's rule of law crisis: What role for the Netherlands?](#)," Clingendael Institute, August 2021.

31 European Court of Auditors, "[The rule of law in the EU – An improved framework to protect the EU's financial interests, but risks remain](#)", Special report 03/2024.

32 See for an overview of such proposals: German-Franco Working Group on EU Reforms, "[Sailing on High Seas – Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century](#)", 18 September 2023.

33 European Court of Auditors, "[The rule of law in the EU – An improved framework to protect the EU's financial interests, but risks remain](#)", Special report 03/2024.

Box 2 Rule of law backsliding in Hungary and Poland and reactions from the EU

In Hungary, the government of Fidesz has since the 2010 gradually been dismantling rule of law reforms that were adopted in the pre-accession context. In Poland, the former government of Law and Justice (PiS) had done the same since 2015, although the tide seems to have been turned after last year's elections. The EU has used its rule of law instruments against both countries in order to enforce change and protect the EU budget against corruption and misuse.

In addition to several infringement procedures – by which the Commission can penalise countries when they fail to fulfil an obligation under the Treaties – and the triggering of the initial stage of the Article 7 procedure, the Commission has been active in using economic governance instruments provided for in secondary EU law. For both countries, considerable sums of EU cohesion funds have been frozen under the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR).³⁴ In the case of Hungary, the Commission decided to hold back all of Hungary's 22 billion euros until the government meets conditions related to judiciary independence, academic freedom, LGBTQ rights and the asylum system. In December 2023, the Commission decided to unlock roughly half of this money due to Hungary's achieved reforms as regards judicial independence. In the case of Poland, roughly 75 billion euros have been suspended until the country meets the conditions for judicial independence. The current government of Donald Tusk has pledged to restore the rule of law and democratic standards, on the basis of which the Commission, in February 2024, proposed to unfreeze the funds.

In addition, both Hungary and Poland have had funding withheld from the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF).³⁵ For Hungary, this implies that 10 billion euros of post-Covid and energy crisis funds are frozen until so-called 'super milestones' related to corruption, public procurement

34 [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council](#), Official Journal of the European Union, 24 June 2021.

35 [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility](#), Official Journal of the European Union, 18 February 2021.

and judicial independence have been reached. For Poland, this adds up to almost 60 billion euros. A portion of these frozen funds has been unlocked due to the countries' progress on the milestones.

The Conditionality Regulation³⁶ has so far only been applied to Hungary, due to breaches of the rule of law that form a risk to the management of the EU budget. As a consequence, an additional 6.3 billion euros of cohesion funds have been suspended until the country complies with the so-called 'super milestones' identified in its post-Covid recovery plan. Although the Commission started to investigate whether the Conditionality Regulation could be triggered against Poland, it was not able to establish a link between Poland's rule of law breaches and the management of the EU budget – which is a key condition to be met in order to trigger the regulation.

Lessons could also be learned from the transitional measures to monitor the rule of law in new Member States, notably the *Cooperation and Verification Mechanism* that was established for Romania and Bulgaria. The decision to continue monitoring Bulgaria and Romania after their accession to the EU was made to see the two countries develop the effective administrative and judicial systems needed to meet the obligations for EU membership and ensure the correct application of EU laws, policies and programmes.³⁷ This kind of mechanism, when accompanied by the use of the abovementioned conditionality instruments for the obtaining of EU funds, could be applied again for new Member States or even further expanded.

Also for candidate countries, the prospect of EU accession, and the necessity to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria, provide an important incentive for reforms in the areas of rule of law and democracy. Already in the 2004 enlargement, strict conditions were set for the new Member States. In the pre-accession process, governments of candidate countries were rewarded when they complied with the conditions and had rewards withheld if they failed to comply. Also currently, and according to the enlargement methodology, no accession chapter in the

36 [Regulation \(EU, Euratom\) 2020/2092 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2020 on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget](#), Official Journal of the European Union, 22 December 2020.

37 European Commission, "[Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for Bulgaria and Romania](#)".

negotiations can be opened unless there is satisfactory fulfilment of the criteria concerning rule of law and democracy. This benefits the EU as a whole as it provides stability in its neighbourhood ('soft power') and enhances pre-accession economic opportunities due to a positive investment climate.

Ukraine and Moldova are clear examples of countries that have implemented reforms at a high pace in readiness for EU accession. Driven by a desire to open accession negotiations, both countries have implemented necessary reforms on the dimension of rule of law. For example, Ukraine has implemented, among other reforms, legislation on the selection procedure for Constitutional Court judges, an anti-corruption programme, anti-money laundering legislation, and a new media law.³⁸ Moldova has made considerable progress related to its judicial framework, the adoption of the electoral code, public procurement regulation, and the tackling of financial crime.³⁹

Risks

Yet enlargement also poses risks to the rule of law and democracy in the EU. First, as stressed above, while the EU sets strict conditions on these areas for candidate countries before they are able to join, once countries have joined, the Union has few effective instruments to contain Member States and enforce reforms when they are caught up in a process of democratic or rule of law backsliding. This so-called *Copenhagen dilemma* poses risks to the functioning of the Union, especially when it welcomes countries that remain fragile in these areas, for example, because reforms have been implemented too rapidly, are stagnating, and/or lack sustainable political backing. Hungary and Poland are examples of such a risk, which is also lurking in current candidate countries in the Western Balkans, which face stagnation in terms of democratic and rule of law reform.⁴⁰ In fact, while in the Western Balkans conditionality worked well for

38 European Commission, "[Communication on EU Enlargement policy, Ukraine 2023 report](#)," 8 November 2023.

39 European Commission, "[Communication on EU Enlargement policy, Moldova 2023 report](#)," 8 November 2023.

40 Wouter Zweers, "[The EU as a Promoter Of 'Stabilitocracy' In The Western Balkans?](#)", Clingendael Institute, 8 February 2022.

a time, the long period spent in the waiting room has frustrated this process in many Balkan countries.⁴¹

There are also threats to the rule of law and democracy in current Member States. Such threats stem from a gap that seems to exist between the pace with which Brussels is currently taking steps towards enlargement and European public opinion.⁴² This could further fuel polarisation and anti-European tendencies. As pointed out in a recent report from the European Council of Foreign Relations (ECFR), anti-European populists are likely to gain in the European elections in at least nine Member States (Austria, Belgium, Czechia, France, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Slovakia).⁴³ Many countries face a crisis of political trust which is symbolised by the rise of radical right revolts against the political and cultural establishment. This puts pressure on the traditional post-war political centre. This is increasingly visible in the Netherlands (see also below).⁴⁴ There are risks involved in an over-hasty enlargement process in which the concerns of the public are not adequately considered. Certainly, especially when steps forward in the accession process (e.g., candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina) are publicly legitimised by so-called ‘good reform progress’ arguments, in practice these decisions reflect simply strategic (geo)political considerations. The EU can improve its enlargement approach by providing clarity as to developments in candidate countries and considerations at stake.⁴⁵

41 Patrycja Szarek-Mason, “[Conditionality in the EU accession process](#),” Cambridge Core, 3 May 2010; See also: Wouter Zweers, “At lightning’s speed or at snail’s pace – the ‘Eastern trio’ and the Western Balkans towards EU membership after ‘24-02’,” forthcoming in *Clingendael Spectator*.

42 Piotr Buras and Engjellushe Morina, “[Catch-27: The contradictory thinking about enlargement in the EU](#),” ECFR Policy Brief, 23 November 2023.

43 Kevin Cunningham, Simon Hix with Susi Dennison, Imogen Learmonth, “[Protected: A sharp right turn: A forecast for the 2024 European Parliament elections](#)”, European Council on Foreign Relations, Policy brief, January 2024.

44 Josse de Voogd and René Cuperus, *De Atlas van Afgehaakt Nederland. Over buitenstaanders en gevestigden*, Den Haag, 2022.

45 Wouter Zweers and Milena Rossokhatska, “[Towards an EU geopolitical approach on transformative terms in the Western Balkans](#)”, February 2024.

Dutch public opinion

This clarity will be specifically important in the Netherlands, which witnessed a pull to the (populist) right during the 2023 general elections. The *Clingendael Barometer* indicates that at the moment, there is little enthusiasm for EU enlargement among the Dutch public. Except for Ukraine, there is no majority support for EU accession for any of the candidate countries, regardless of whether they meet the accession requirements or not. This suggests that, although the Dutch government is already known as being one of the most enlargement-critical Member States, its 'strict and fair' approach towards enlargement might not be sufficient to convince the Dutch public. The *Clingendael Barometer* findings suggest that the Dutch public is not overly convinced about the transformative effect of EU accession on democracy and rule of law in candidate countries. According to the *Clingendael Barometer* survey, 'only' 43% of respondents perceived 'supporting democratic transitions in the countries concerned' as a decisive argument in favour of EU enlargement; a majority of 57% did not agree with this statement.

Given this sceptical public mood, it is important for the Dutch government to stick to its 'strict and fair' approach and to communicate this position more clearly in order to alleviate worries and concerns. In some documents, the government has broadened its enlargement approach to 'strict, fair and engaged'. 'Engagement' here implies that the Dutch government does not passively wait for reforms in candidate countries, but engages in, and commits itself to, actively supporting countries in rule of law reforms, anti-corruption and democratic-institutional innovations in their pre-accession phase. In addition, the Netherlands could advocate a more consistent and effective use of the existing rule of law instruments that the EU has at its disposal to contain current Member States, for example in a leading group on the rule of law, and communicate this position as such.

5 Economy and budget

Traditionally, Dutch perspectives towards European integration have been strongly guided by economic interests. Being an open trade-based economy, the Netherlands has indeed much to gain from EU integration, with the single market as its cornerstone. Within the single market, goods, services, capital and people can move freely, which has led to a significant increase in overall trade among Member States and has made the EU one of the most powerful economic blocs in the world. Expanding the single market with new Member States, likewise, could yield important benefits for the Netherlands. While an expansion of the EU, and hence the single market, could potentially enhance these economic benefits, enlargement also entails risks in terms of the overall economy and the EU budget, particularly given the Dutch position as a net contributor.

Opportunities

An important argument in favour of EU enlargement is that it would lead to enhanced economic opportunities, the creation of jobs and an overall increase in the EU's competitiveness due to an expansion of the single market – although such an expansion does not necessarily require new countries to fully join the Union.⁴⁶ In particular, a country with an open export economy like the Netherlands could benefit from this. The trade benefits of the single market for the Netherlands, as calculated by the Central Planning Bureau (CPB), are very significant: 'EU trade benefits for the Netherlands amount to 3.1% of GDP, making it one of the countries that have benefited most from increased trade by the EU.'⁴⁷ In general, it is estimated, for example by the Dutch Social Economic Council (in Dutch: SER), that revenues from the single market very much outweigh the costs incurred by the net contributor position of the Netherlands.⁴⁸

Enlargement with the Eastern trio and Western Balkans has the potential to increase the EU's economic clout. For example, Ukraine is well known for

46 Membership of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) would, for example, also suffice.

47 CPB, "[Handelsbaten van de EU en de interne markt](#)," January 2022.

48 See for an overview: SER, "[Why is Europe important and what's in it for the Netherlands?](#)"

being an agricultural powerhouse and the Western Balkans are rich in lithium, a commodity much in demand for the purpose of electrification for the green energy transition. Hence, incorporating these countries into the EU would enhance its access to critical raw materials and minerals and would benefit the Union's resilience.

Yet such opportunities depend on how the EU manages its own budget and finances. These have already been put under pressure due to additional spending on the energy transition, digitalisation, migration and reconstruction aid to Ukraine. EU enlargement will put further pressure on the budget. The risks associated with this will be explained below, but it is important to note here that EU enlargement necessarily requires the Union to modernise the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and make it more flexible in the context of new challenges. Such calls have already been widespread regardless of EU enlargement, but vested interests in the budget – for example when it comes to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) – have impeded reforms. EU enlargement changes Member States' interests regarding budget reforms, and, hence, can be used as an incentive to adjust and reform EU finances. Enlargement can act as a crowbar to break through long-standing logjams and conflicts of interest.

Risks

Enlargement gives rise to economic and financial risks. Currently, candidate countries do not yet fully fulfil the basic conditions necessary for the proper functioning of the internal market. For example, breaches of the rule of law, corruption or misuse of funds pose direct risks to European business, affecting the single market and EU competitiveness. When citizens and businesses move across Member States, they should be able to rely on the notion that government authority is exercised in accordance with the law. This explains why rule of law accession criteria are the top priority and are the *sine qua non* for EU integration. The examples of Hungary and Poland show, however, the difficulties of protecting the EU budget against rule of law violations in existing Member States.

In addition, the EU accession of relatively poor countries will have distributional implications when it comes to the EU budget, in particular for the CAP and cohesion policy. Although various estimates are circulating – some more alarming than others – there is a broad consensus that without reforming the budget, agricultural powerhouse Ukraine will take a disproportionate big bite out of the

existing CAP (estimates range from €180 to 250 billion from the EU budget⁴⁹). The same applies to the EU cohesion policy. Although cohesion funds serve to establish economic convergence between Member States, in reality they do not deliver on this promise, due to a lack of a system of ‘transparent, independent, and effective auditing’.⁵⁰ The accession of at least eight relatively poor new Member States has significant implications. After this enlargement round, many more existing net recipients are likely to become net contributors. This might have a negative effect on support for the EU and enlargement.

A discussion on reforming the EU budget will be inevitable under these conditions. Several reforms have passed in review. Will it be a matter of austerity or will national contributions be increased? Or will the answer be more EU debt financing? This is a debate fraught with pitfalls, and one that could shake up relations in the EU, between north and south, east and west, and within nation-states between left and right and between mainstream and populist parties. The risk is that enlargement could turn into a protracted battle of interests for net contributor positions and a hard fight for EU financing in terms of a debt and transfer union. In times when the mandate of established political parties of the middle is weak, this is a political electoral risk not to be underestimated.

Dutch public opinion

Dutch positions towards the EU have traditionally been strongly guided by economic interests. To protect its financial interests, the Netherlands has been committed to the rule of law agenda in existing and new Member States and is reluctant to support budgetary reforms that could lead to a disproportionate expansion of the overall budget. However, this positioning is not unequivocally reflected in Dutch public opinion. *Clingendael Barometer* data suggests that for the Dutch public, although important, the impact of enlargement on the Dutch net contribution to the EU budget is not perceived as a decisive argument against enlargement: 45% of respondents saw the rise in the Netherlands’ net contribution to the EU as a decisive argument against enlargement. Crucial elements to feed into the narrative on enlargement would be a discussion on

49 Gerardo Fortuna, “[Ukraine’s EU membership will trigger a rewriting of CAP](#),” Euractiv, 6 October 2023

50 Adriaan Schout, “[Cohesion policy: A management audit](#),” Clingendael Institute, 2023.

what the EU generates for the Dutch treasury and how enlargement could be designed in such a way that this ratio remains the same.

This could well be a daunting task, as the Dutch public does not unequivocally associate EU enlargement with economic benefits. According to the *Clingendael Barometer*, 'only' 36% of respondents perceived 'greater opportunities for Dutch business' as a decisive argument in favour of EU enlargement.

6 Migration and the free movement of persons

The free movement of people, alongside the free movement of goods, services and capital, is among the core freedoms of the single market. It is the cornerstone of Union citizenship, introduced in 1993 with the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty. EU enlargement eventually implies an expansion of the community in which people are free to move. This has implications for migration within the EU (hence, between Member States), and also for migration from outside the EU (so-called third countries). Just as the common internal market creates responsibilities and obligations that must provide citizens with confidence in the EU, European citizens must be confident that in a “borderless” Union Member States will fulfil their obligations concerning external borders to deter (irregular) migration.

Opportunities

EU enlargement with the Western Balkans implies that these countries – which are called ‘transit countries’ through which migrants and asylum seekers from third countries enter the Union – will be integrated into the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum. This is crucial for implementation of the Pact, but eventually also for the functioning of Schengen – the common space without border controls established in 1995. Notably, once migrants have reached the EU, they can, in principle, move freely within the Schengen area. Although new Member States will not immediately join Schengen, it is crucially important that candidate countries bring their national asylum and migration legislation in line with the EU acquis.

The forecast for Western Balkan countries accession provided a clear incentive for such an alignment, for example with regard to visa policy. In December 2022, the Commission presented an EU action plan for the Western Balkans containing several measures to strengthen cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkans. These included the strengthening of border management along migration routes, swift asylum procedures, fighting human smuggling, enhancing

readmission cooperation and returns, and achieving visa policy alignment.⁵¹ According to the *Commission Enlargement Package 2023* there has been substantial advancement on these issues in the candidate countries.⁵²

Risks

Despite this progress most candidate countries still lag behind.⁵³ This is a risk, especially given the large number of irregular migrants that enter the Western Balkan countries and given the current situation in the Middle East, that this number could well increase in the years to come, making alignment with the EU acquis more pressing. In particular, the accession of countries that are currently politically unstable (or even at war, e.g., Ukraine), might lead to large irregulated numbers of refugees and migrants coming to Western Europe, for which – regardless of the EU’s humanitarian mandate – political and social support is lacking. Moreover, incorporating countries that border Russia – Ukraine and Georgia – enhances the risk of an instrumentalization of migrants by Russia and Belarus,⁵⁴ as occurred in Poland since 2021 and – more recently – Finland.

Arguably, with more Member States, agreement on the EU Migration and Asylum Policy could become even more difficult, let alone its implementation. Although since the Lisbon Treaty, Member States have voted on this policy area using QMV, the expansion of the Union with such transit countries could make it more difficult to find majorities. Also, it could be easier for them to form a blocking minority.

Other risks are associated with a too-rapid opening of labour markets to poorer countries. This leads not only to a brain drain of young talent from accession countries but also to an unguided flow of cheap labour forces to richer Member States, undermining standards of labour and enhancing the risk of exploitation. As thoroughly assessed by the Dutch State Commission on Demographic Affairs 2050, the Netherlands has benefited considerably from intra-EU labour

51 European Commission, “[Commission action plan for migratory routes in Western Balkans](#)”, 5 December 2022.

52 European Commission, “[EU enlargement package 2023](#)”, 8 November 2023.

53 Ibid.

54 Monika Sie Dhian Ho and Myrthe Wijnkoop, “[The instrumentalization of migration: A geopolitical perspective and toolbox](#)”, Clingendael, December 2022.

migration.⁵⁵ However, in the current demographic context, these benefits no longer outweigh the social costs, for example in terms of pressure on housing and public services. For that reason, the State Commission advocates a stronger selection criteria as to which type of labour and student migrants enter the Netherlands.⁵⁶ In the face of EU enlargement, the State Commission advises to hold on to – or even extend – the current maximum seven-year temporary restriction on labour migration from new Member States.

Dutch public opinion

As in many other European countries, migration is a highly polarised issue in the Netherlands. For four years, the *Clingendael Barometer* surveys found that large-scale irregular migration and unwanted foreign interference in migrant communities in the Netherlands are two of the top concerns among the Dutch public.⁵⁷ It is important to keep this in mind, as this issue is having a destabilising effect on European societies and is a breeding ground for support for radical right, anti-migration and anti-EU parties.

Regardless of whether or not the abovementioned temporary restrictions to post-accession labour migration are agreed, the accession of the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia will inevitably lead to an increase in the number of labour migrants in the Netherlands.⁵⁸ This will have implications for public support for enlargement. The *Clingendael Barometer* indicated that only 13% of respondents perceived ‘more labour that can come to the Netherlands under the free movement of persons’ as a decisive argument in favour of EU enlargement. In contrast, 49% of respondents perceived large-scale migration to the Netherlands from new Member States as a decisive argument against EU enlargement. In another survey commissioned by the abovementioned state commission, Clingendael found that almost 74% of respondents did not

55 State Commission on Demographic Developments 2050, “*Gematigde Groei*,” Report, January 2024.

56 See for this argument and proposals to channel the influx of labour migration: State Commission on Demographic Developments 2050, “*Gematigde Groei*,” January 2024.

57 Monika Sie Dhian Ho, Mark Elchardus, Christopher Houtkamp and Teun van der Laan, “[Tussen Hoop en Vrees](#),” February 2024.

58 Saskia Hollander, Anouk Pronk, Robin Neumann and Monika Sie Dhian Ho, “[Geopolitieke contexten als oorzaken van migratie naar Nederland: een focus op landen van herkomst](#)”, January 2024.

support the unrestricted free movement of persons. These findings suggest that Dutch perceptions towards EU enlargement will be guided by (labour) migration concerns.

7 EU institutional structure

While much of the EU enlargement debate is generally focused on the progress of reforms in candidate countries, another important dimension is the EU's own absorption capacity.⁵⁹ There is a realisation that the imminent new expansion of the EU to as many as 35 to 37 countries is not possible without substantial EU reforms, given the complexity of and divisions in current EU decision-making and governance. EU enlargement provides a clear opportunity for the current Union to reform; however, the accession of eight (to nine or ten) countries in itself poses risks to EU decision-making and the balance of power.

Opportunities

One of the opportunities of EU enlargement is that the EU could give itself a systemic update or reset. In previous enlargement rounds, the EU's set-up has undergone substantial changes. A notable example is the Treaty of Nice, which was meant to make the institutional structure of the EU fit for enlargement with the Central and Eastern European countries as well as Cyprus and Malta. The Treaty of Lisbon also implied an update of EU institutions – but is no longer considered sufficient to absorb eight candidate countries, particularly if they all join at the same time.

In fact, EU reform is seen by many experts as a *sine qua non* for enlargement. Illustrative of this argument is the Franco-German working paper *Sailing on High Seas*, which suggests multiple avenues on which the EU should reform to enable enlargement.⁶⁰ These range from proposals to adjust its form (for example, a Union of distinct tiers with a different balance of rights and obligations) to proposals concerning the institutional set-up, such as the adoption of a new system for seat allocation in the EP, a reform of voting rules and decision-making

59 See: Camille van Hees, Louise van Schaik and Wouter Zweers, "[The Dutch Dragging Their Feet: The Challenge Of Being Constructive While Making The Eu 'Fit for 30+'](#)," Clingendael Institute, November 2023.

60 German-Franco Working Group on EU Reforms, "[Sailing on High Seas – Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century](#)", 18 September 2023.

in the Council, and reforming the size of the Commission's structure.⁶¹ Many of the reforms that have passed in review had already been considered necessary before the enlargement debate emerged. Enlargement thus could be a boost for EU innovation.

Risks

The entrance of eight new Member States will make negotiations in an inter-governmental setting more complex.⁶² Moreover, it will inevitably lead to new power balances and different majorities in certain domains. Notably, the power of smaller or medium-sized countries like the Netherlands could relatively diminish in an enlarged Union. At the same time, the relative power of larger countries like Germany and France, and also Poland, could increase in a larger EU.

Second, a larger EU could mean an increased risk for the bloc of not being able to move ahead, as more Member States naturally means more vetoes in the Council's current set-up. Moreover, there is a risk that debates about the future of Europe in times of geopolitical storm will fuel polarisation between Member States. When talking about EU reform, Member States have opposing views regarding what needs to be done to become more fit for the future. Some member states (e.g., the Netherlands) prefer to strengthen rule of law instruments and QMV in CFSP, while southern Member States prefer measures to enhance financial solidarity among Member States, for example through introducing QMV on fiscal policy and the EU budget. While this could result in fruitful outcomes, it could also lead to deadlocks blocking further EU cooperation and enlargement altogether.

In this way, the EU risks becoming too inward looking, thereby losing its geopolitical compass. In addition, candidate countries fear that reform debates are a 'smokescreen to mask the lack of will and ability to enlarge the EU further'.⁶³ Given that unanimity is required for any meaningful change, the EU seems to be

61 German-Franco Working Group on EU Reforms, "[Sailing on High Seas – Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century](#)", 18 September 2023.

62 [Ibid.](#)

63 Piotr Buras and Engjellushe Morina, "[Catch-27: The contradictory thinking about enlargement in the EU](#)," ECFR Policy Brief, 23 November 2023.

on track for lengthy and open-ended negotiations, which will contradict the self-proclaimed urgency for geopolitically motivated and bold decisions.

Dutch public opinion

Concerns about the institutional implications of EU enlargement are, to a certain extent, also voiced by the Dutch public. According to the *Clingendael Barometer*, there seems to be some appetite for institutional reform. For example, 65% of respondents feared that internal divisions within the Union have widened to such an extent that the EU risks losing its capacity to act. Moreover, a slight majority of 58% were of the opinion that unanimity must be let go. In addition, 40% of respondents feared that enlargement would diminish the influence of the Netherlands in the EU.

8 Conclusions

The current fragile political situation in Europe – symbolised by the crisis of the political centre parties and the rise of Eurosceptic and radical right parties – suggests that now is not an ideal time for large-scale experiments such as new EU enlargement. However, at the same time, the geopolitical situation, provoked by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, has forced the EU to spread its wings to offer protection to European countries under pressure and to guarantee security in the EU as a whole. In order to go beyond this ‘enlargement paradox’, it is crucial that the enlargement agenda is guided by comprehensive risk assessments, reaping enlargement benefits and building safeguards on fundamental policy domains. Moreover, it is important that political leaders in Europe do not present their electorates with a *fait accompli* when it comes to the outcome of candidates’ accession processes. Instead, leaders could start shaping national strategic discussions.

In its current form, it is likely that the EU will not be able to accommodate the next enlargement if many countries join at the same time. That task will be complex, as Ilke Toygür rightly stated: ‘Moving forward, the EU faces a complex picture that triangulates enlargement, institutional reform, and the EU’s economic security.’⁶⁴ To reduce the risk of overstretching, the EU will have to mitigate its ambitions and take time to reform. As argued in this paper, it is not only the EU budget and subsidy schemes that will need to be drastically reformed, but also its toolbox of instruments to protect the budget against violations of the rule of law (and the way they are used and coordinated).

The Netherlands will also have to prepare itself for a changed Union and its own role therein. This means that political leaders in the Netherlands need to have a serious political and public debate on the opportunities and risks of EU enlargement in order to inform and engage the general public in these strategic discussions. This will not be easy in a context of political distrust, socioeconomic polarisation and societal unease – all of which will seriously affect a potential broadening and deepening of the European project.

64 Ilke Toygür in “[EPC Round-up, Enlargement Package marks a turn in policy to the East](#)”, 14 November 2023.

In fact, the combined tendency of new geopolitical vigilance and EU-critical attitudes is reflected in Dutch public opinion on EU enlargement. The *Clingendael Barometer* survey data, as discussed in this paper, demonstrated a clear ambivalence towards a new round of enlargement. On the one hand, there appears to be some geopolitical awareness that the accession of Ukraine is necessary for the EU's security and stability. Yet, this geopolitical vigilance does not seem to spread to the Western Balkans, whose EU accession is not supported by a majority of the Dutch public. Regarding the Western Balkans, significant reservations remain about a potential increase in labour migration from those countries, the rule of law and the import of conflict. These conclusions explain why it is imperative to engage the Dutch public throughout the accession steps to come.

The following propositions could guide national strategic discussions in the Netherlands on how to manage the opportunities and risks of a new round of EU enlargement, such as presented in this paper:

Formulate a Dutch EU Enlargement Agenda

It is crucial that the Netherlands continuously positions itself in debates on enlargement at EU level, guided by its current 'strict, fair and engaged' approach. For that purpose, the (new) Dutch government could develop an EU Enlargement Agenda, involving:

- **An agenda for 'strict'**: commitment to the merit-based enlargement methodology and strictly upholding accession provisions, such as aligning candidate countries' foreign policy with the main geostrategic direction of the EU
- **An agenda for 'fair'**: commitment to rewarding progress on accession criteria. Further research is needed on how phased or staged accession (meaning pre-integration for candidate countries by way of participating in some EU institutions⁶⁵) might work best for candidate countries and the EU as a whole
- **An agenda for 'engaged'**: intensified support by the government, parliament and civil society is necessary in assisting candidate countries in the build-up of stable democratic procedures and rule of law arrangements.

65 Such as developed in the Commission's *Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*.

Formulate a Dutch EU Reform Agenda

As well as reforms in candidate countries, it is important to make the EU itself enlargement-fit. It is recommended that both government departments and parliament promote discussions within the Netherlands on necessary policy and institutional reforms. Issues for discussion could include, for example, enhancing the EU's geopolitical clout, the effectiveness of the rule of law toolbox, the EU budget and auditing mechanisms, the overall institutional set-up, or the transitional period for the restrictions on labour migration after accession.

Set up an EU enlargement and reform taskforce within the Dutch MFA

The abovementioned agendas for enlargement and reform could be prepared and guided by a Taskforce EU Enlargement/Reform/Future at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with representatives from other departments and posts. This could act as a 'policy lab' for permanent focus and creative Dutch positioning on the future of EU developments.

Invest in knowledge generation and synthesis on enlargement impacts

More extensive research is needed into the opportunities and risks of EU enlargement for the EU as a whole and for the position of the Netherlands in particular. It is also important to examine what the staged accession approach could mean in practice for these opportunities and risks. In addition, continuous public opinion research, supplemented by qualitative focus group research, is needed on the dilemmas of EU enlargement and reform.

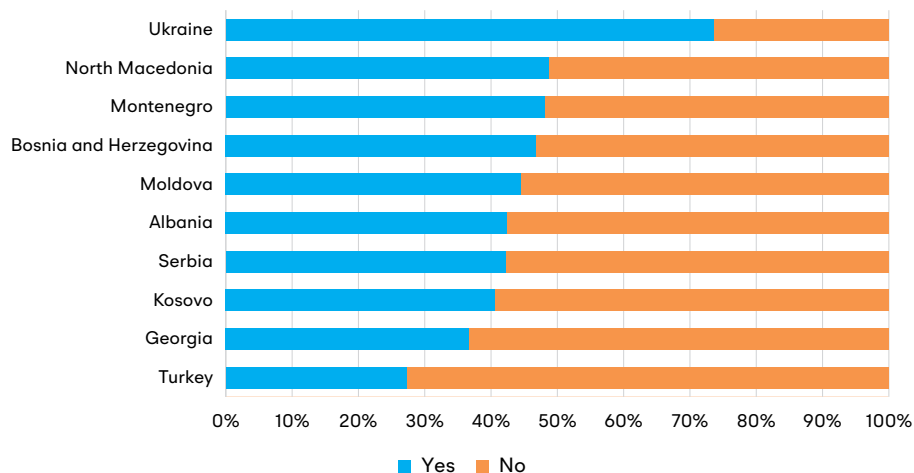
Invest in public debate

It is strongly advised that the Dutch government invests in public debate on the strategic risks and benefits of new enlargement, including a discussion about the pros and cons of earlier enlargement. It is thereby important to take into consideration the (legitimate) concerns of the Dutch public regarding labour migration, the European value community (rule of law) and the EU's decisiveness and ability to act. It is therefore important to be clear about both risks and opportunities and the trade-offs that exist. This could be facilitated by a series of so-called citizen panels or other forms of public engagement.

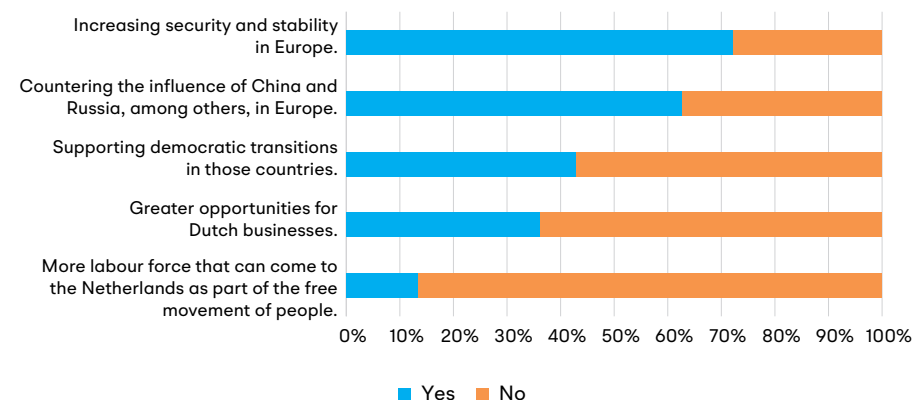
Appendix

The 2024 Clingendael Barometer Survey: the outcomes regarding EU enlargement (fieldwork conducted in December 2023)⁶⁶

Which of the following countries should be allowed to join the European Union if they meet the accession requirements?

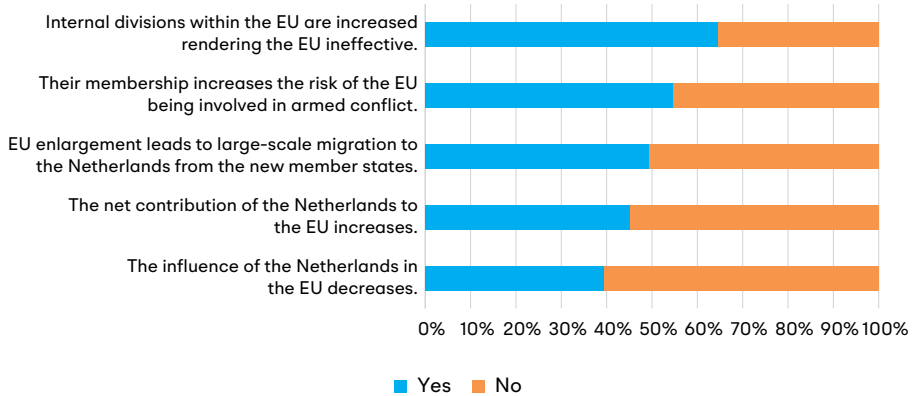


A number of arguments are presented in favor of enlargement of the European Union. Which of the following arguments are decisive for your position on enlargement?

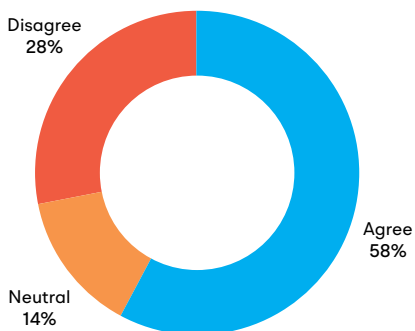


⁶⁶ The authors would like to thank Christopher Houtkamp, Teun van der Laan, Monika Sie Dhian Ho and Mark Elchardus for conducting the fieldwork for this survey.

A number of arguments are presented against enlargement of the European Union. Which of the following arguments are decisive for your position on enlargement?



Currently, foreign and security policy decisions in the European Union are made unanimously. That means an opposing vote by one member state can stop those decisions. Do you agree with the following statement: This rule of unanimity should be abolished.



To become a member of the European Union, candidate countries must meet a number of conditions (such as: having a democratic rule of law, a functioning market economy, implementing all EU legislation). Do you agree with the following statement: Membership should be possible even if not all those conditions are met, if it serves the security or international influence of the Union.

