Centre Grande Europe
Institut Jacques Delors

Enlargement of the European Union: why, when, how?

1973 → **2013**

21 accessions

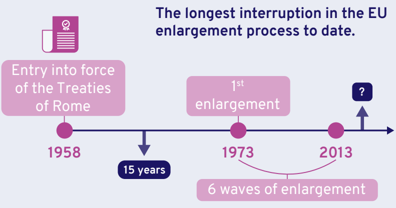
expanded the membership of the European Communities and, subsequently, the European Union.

Since 2013

No further accession

and all indications suggest that this pause in the EU enlargement process will last for **more than 15 years.**

The longest interruption in the EU enlargement process to date.



It is against the backdrop of this ‘enlargement fatigue’ that the unexpected revival of this process, following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, must be assessed.

1 Enlargement: a founding dynamic of European integration

Alongside deepening (the gradual expansion of the scope of powers exercised at EU level + the progressive strengthening of supranational institutions), enlargement is a key driving force shaping European integration.

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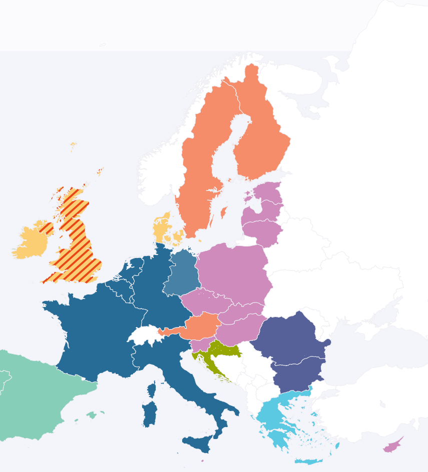
This process has transformed the European Communities, originally comprising 6 Western European countries…

27

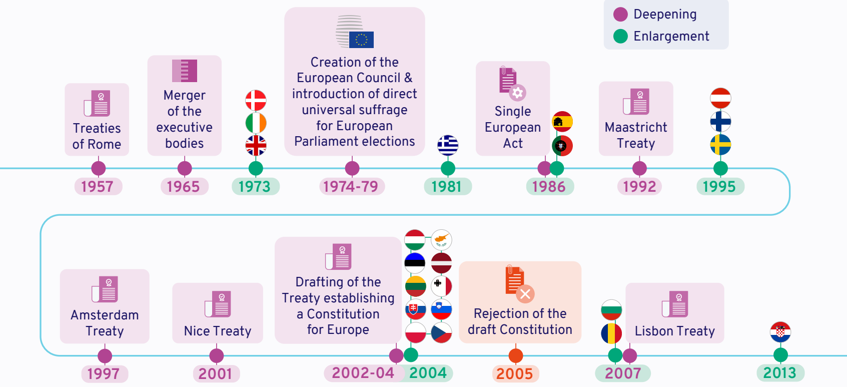
…into a continent-wide European Union comprising 27 Member States.

The successive waves of enlargement

- **Founding States:** Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Federal Republic of Germany
- **1st enlargement (1973):** Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom
- **2nd enlargement (1981):** Greece
- **3rd enlargement (1986):** Spain, Portugal
- **German Reunification (1990)**
- **4th enlargement (1995):** Austria, Finland, Sweden
- **5th enlargement (2004):** Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia
- **6th enlargement (2007):** Bulgaria, Romania
- **7th enlargement (2013):** Croatia
- **Withdrawal of the United Kingdom (2020)**



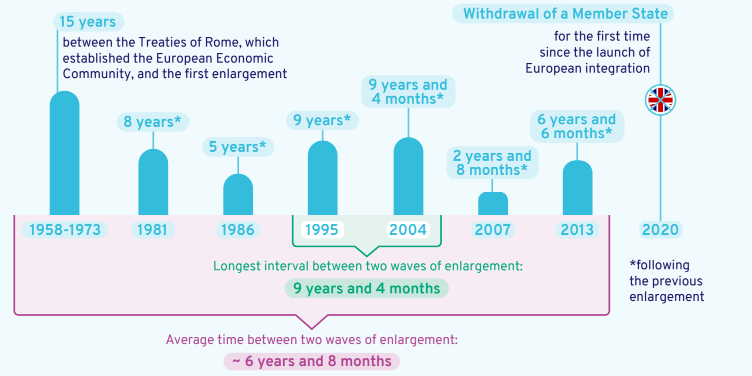
The complementarity between enlargement and deepening in European integration



● Deepening
● Enlargement

Treaties of Rome — 1957
Merger of the executive bodies — 1965
1973
Creation of the European Council & introduction of direct universal suffrage for European Parliament elections — 1974-79
1981
Single European Act — 1986
1986
Maastricht Treaty — 1992
1995
Amsterdam Treaty — 1997
Nice Treaty — 2001
Drafting of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe — 2002-04
2004
Rejection of the draft Constitution — 2005
2007
Lisbon Treaty — 2007
2013

A process stalled since 2013: no further enlargement for over 13 years



15 years between the Treaties of Rome, which established the European Economic Community, and the first enlargement

Withdrawal of a Member State for the first time since the launch of European integration

Longest interval between two waves of enlargement: **9 years and 4 months**

Average time between two waves of enlargement: **~ 6 years and 8 months**

*following the previous enlargement

2 The rationale for and challenges of the enlargement process

From the perspective of **candidate States**

Symbolic dimension

Belonging to the “European family” as a recognised, respected and equal member.

Economic dimension

Access to the Single Market and to economic and social development opportunities, supported by the solidarity underpinning the EU’s cohesion policy.

Geopolitical dimension

Taking part, on an equal footing with other countries committed to the European project, in decisions shaping the continent’s future, thereby offering greater stability and security, and enhancing credibility and attractiveness on the international stage.

Political dimension

Consolidating democratic standards, the rule of law, and other fundamental values and principles underpinning the European project.

From the perspective of **Member States**

Continuing the logic of the European project

A project conceived from the outset as inclusive and continental in scope, aimed at promoting the peaceful settlement of disputes by extending a model based on the rule of law, cooperation and stronger shared interests.

Geopolitical dimension

Stabilising and securing the continent, and strengthening the EU’s position on the international stage.

Economic dimension

A larger Single Market, enabling convergence with the rest of the continent.

Mutual interest: avoiding the cost of non-accession

Candidate States have every interest in participating in the development of EU standards rather than having to comply with them.

For Member States, enlargement is an investment aimed at avoiding the additional costs arising from instability, unfair competition or the spread of hostile influences in their neighbourhood.

However, while the enlargement process helps advance these interests, each application for membership raises its own challenges.

The challenges of enlargement

Maintaining EU cohesion, given greater political, economic, social and geopolitical diversity among Member States

→ already apparent during the first enlargement, with Ireland's accession in 1973, when its level of economic development was significantly lower than that of the other Member States

The risk of destabilising or weakening the EU in certain sensitive policy areas

→ for example, the integration of Spanish agriculture in 1986, Polish agriculture in 2004 or Ukrainian agriculture in the future; or the neutrality of Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995, at a time when the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was being launched.

Adapting the institutions

→ for example, the need to renegotiate the allocation of seats in the European Parliament or the composition of the Commission

Adapting the budget

→ maintaining a balance between "net contributor" and "net beneficiary" Member States, with future members often expected to fall into the latter category

Ensuring the lasting credibility of commitments made by candidate States

→ risk of democratic and rule of law backsliding after accession

The budgetary costs of enlargement

Estimating the budgetary implications of further accessions is a complex exercise.

Contrary to a common misconception, the accession of poorer countries does not automatically lead to an increase in the EU budget. Much depends on the scenario envisaged.

The budgetary implications of enlargement cannot be assessed simply by projecting how the EU operated before accession. The financial terms of each accession are negotiated to ensure that they are acceptable to all Member States.

since the mid-2000s The EU budget has remained relatively stable, **at between 1% and 1.2%** of the Union's gross national income.

The accession of a few Western Balkan countries by the end of the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF 2028–2034) would have very limited budgetary implications.

In the event of a broader and more complex enlargement, particularly one involving Ukraine's accession, the current MFF framework could nevertheless prove inadequate.

Above all, enlargement is not an accounting exercise. It is a strategic investment in:

- the security of the European continent and the EU's geopolitical role
- new economic opportunities
- potential new momentum for internal EU reform

3 From enlargement fatigue to renewed momentum

A new impetus since 2022

	1987	1995	1999	2000	2003	2004	2005	2007	2008	2009	2010	2012	2013	2014	2016	2018	2022	2023	2024	2026	
Turkey	🔵		🟣				🟢									🟠					Negotiations at a standstill *16 negotiating chapters opened out of 35 | 1 chapter closed*
Bulgaria		🔵	🟣	🟢				⚫													EU Member State
Romania		🔵	🟣	🟢				⚫													EU Member State
Croatia					🔵	🟣	🟢						⚫								EU Member State
North Macedonia						🔵	🟣										🟢				Analytical examination of the country's level of preparation completed
Montenegro									🔵		🟣	🟢									33 negotiating chapters opened – 21 chapters closed
Serbia										🔵		🟣		🟢							22 negotiating chapters opened – 2 chapters closed
Albania										🔵				🟣			🟢				33 negotiating chapters opened – 4 chapters closed
Bosnia and Herzegovina															🔵		🟣				Pending the opening of negotiations
Moldova																	🔵 🟣			🟢	24 negotiating chapters opened – 0 chapter closed
Ukraine																	🔵 🟣			🟢	24 negotiating chapters open – 0 chapter closed
Georgia																	🔵	🟣	🟠		Accession process suspended
Kosovo																	🔵				Pending the granting of candidate status

🔵 Date application submitted
🟣 Date candidate status granted by the EU
🟢 Date of opening of negotiations
🟠 Date accession suspended
⚫ Date of accession

More than 13 years without a new accession: why the enlargement process has stalled in the Western Balkans

On the candidates' side

Political and economic instability
rooted in conflicts that have proved difficult to overcome

Insufficient reforms
and even democratic backsliding

Strong geopolitical competition
fueling Eurosceptic narratives and exacerbated by the EU's own hesitations

On the EU's side

Enlargement fatigue
A perception that the process is moving too fast and going too far, and that the previous waves of enlargement need to be "digested", reflected in public opinion, particularly in response to "illiberal" developments in some States that joined the EU in 2004

Lack of unity and resources
Member States turning inward to focus on domestic problems, alongside major differences in their level of interest in the Western Balkans and the region's accession

Doubts about the way forward for the European project
Questions surrounding the relationship between enlargement and deepening, against a backdrop of growing opposition to the European project as a whole

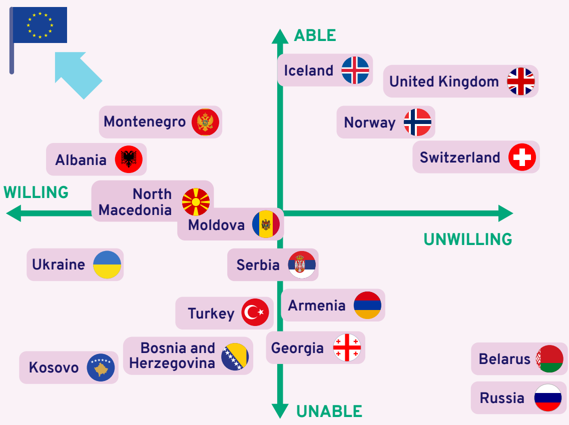
Europe's polycrisis
A rapid succession of crises since 2008, prompting the EU to pursue other priorities

Potential enlargements: state of play in October 2026

To **join the Union**, a country must have both:

the "will"
submit an application and mobilise the political will and resources needed to complete the accession process.

the "ability"
be able to meet the conditions set by the EU and comply with its accession criteria.



This chart, which is open to debate and constantly evolving, seeks to position most non-EU European countries (whether candidates or not) along these two dimensions, taking into account both the positions of their current government and the aspirations of their citizens, as reflected in opinion polls.

4 Rethinking the process: towards "gradual accession"

Faced with the tension between the geopolitical imperative to accelerate accession and the obstacles that make rapid enlargement unrealistic

The idea of "gradual accession (or integration)" is gaining traction.

To reform the accession process to make it more gradual and more rewarding for candidate States, by granting them, from the outset of the process, benefits that have traditionally only been available after accession.

Examples of gradual integration already under way

	ENERGY COMMUNITY	EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY CORPS	ROAM LIKE AT HOME	ERASMUS+	CIVIL PROTECTION MECHANISM	GROWTH PLAN
Albania	●	●	in progress ●	●	●	●
Bosnia and Herzegovina	●	●	in progress ●	●	●	●
Kosovo	●	●	in progress ●	●		●
Georgia	●	●		●		
North Macedonia	●	●	in progress ●	●	●	●
Moldova	●	●	●	●	●	●
Montenegro	●	●	in progress ●	●	●	●
Serbia	●	●	in progress ●	●	●	●
Turkey		●		●	●	
Ukraine	●	●	●	●	●	

From a binary to a gradual approach: establishing an intermediate status between "candidate" and "member"

Among the various possible models of "gradual integration", the Centre Grande Europe of the Jacques Delors Institute proposes the creation of an intermediate status

Available to candidate States that have credibly met the EU's requirements:

- Democracy
- Rule of law
- Respect for EU values and principles
- Alignement with the Common Foreign and Security Policy

→ benefits hitherto reserved to Member States, helping them prepare more quickly and effectively for full membership, which remains the ultimate objective.

This status would notably allow to:

- **Participate in the work of EU institutions** (without voting rights)
- **Gain access to additional funding**
- **Take part in certain common policies under conditions similar** to those applying to Member States.

In return, this innovation would enable Member States to:

1. Respond to geopolitical urgency by closing ranks without rushing the accession of candidates that are not yet sufficiently prepared.
2. Begin to deliver on the promise of accession made in 2003, thereby strengthening its credibility.
3. Establish a clear distinction between candidate States making progress towards accession and those that are stagnating or even regressing.

It would also improve preparedness for the functioning of an enlarged Union through early socialisation between "old" and "new" Member States, thereby reducing the risk of misunderstandings in the aftermath of accession.

5 Looking ahead

A candidate's path to membership

Accession negotiations

conducted within the framework of an "intergovernmental conference" (IGC), bringing together the candidate State and the 27 Member States. The European Commission plays an important role in driving progress, monitoring developments and coordinating the process.

structured around 35 chapters, grouped into 6 thematic clusters.

Once agreement reached on a chapter, it is provisionally closed. However, until everything is agreed, nothing is agreed. Particular emphasis is placed on Chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security): a lack of progress in these areas generally prevents progress on other chapters.

Example: Poland → **Negotiations** 30 March 1998 → 13 Dec. 2002

Drafting and signing the Accession Treaty

A treaty is concluded between the 27 Member States and the candidate State. It sets out, in particular, transitional periods and other specific arrangements for the enlargement in question. It may also amend the treaties governing the EU, for example by reforming its institutions to accommodate the increased number of Member States.

Accession Treaty signed 16 April 2003

Ratifications completed 4 March 2004

Ratification of the Accession Treaty

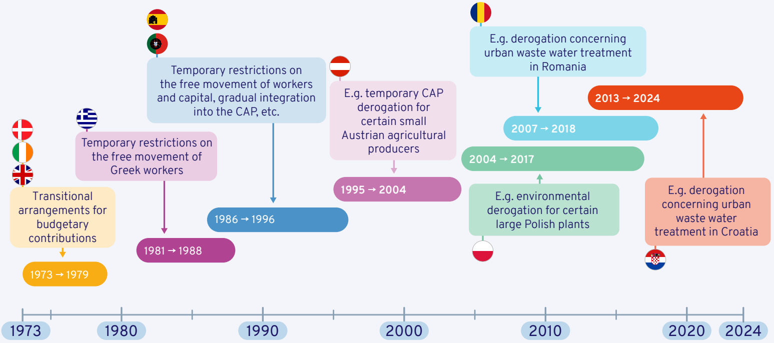
The Accession Treaty must be ratified by all Member States and the candidate State in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements. It must also receive the approval of the European Parliament.

Accession 1 May 2004

Once ratified by all parties, accession takes effect on the date specified in the treaty.

The core of future accessions: transitional periods

Every enlargement has involved tailor-made transitional periods for each new Member State, covering areas such as the internal market, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and EU environmental standards:



Transitional arrangements for budgetary contributions
1973 → 1979

Temporary restrictions on the free movement of Greek workers
1981 → 1988

Temporary restrictions on the free movement of workers and capital, gradual integration into the CAP, etc.
1986 → 1996

E.g. temporary CAP derogation for certain small Austrian agricultural producers
1995 → 2004

E.g. environmental derogation for certain large Polish plants
2004 → 2017

E.g. derogation concerning urban waste water treatment in Romania
2007 → 2018

E.g. derogation concerning urban waste water treatment in Croatia
2013 → 2024

New Member States have every interest in requesting such time-limited derogations, as they help reconcile rapid accession with the gradual capacity to absorb and implement the acquis.

Accession treaties also provide for transitional periods requested by current Member States, particularly regarding the free movement of workers, as well as rapid reaction mechanisms in the event of imbalance:

safeguard clauses allow the European Commission, at the request of a Member State – whether new or not – or on its own initiative, to adopt exceptional and temporary corrective measures to prevent or address serious difficulties that may arise from the accession of a new Member State.

Accession does not automatically entail the adoption of the euro or entry into the Schengen Area, as each is subject to its own conditions. Access to certain benefits of EU membership is therefore already gradual.

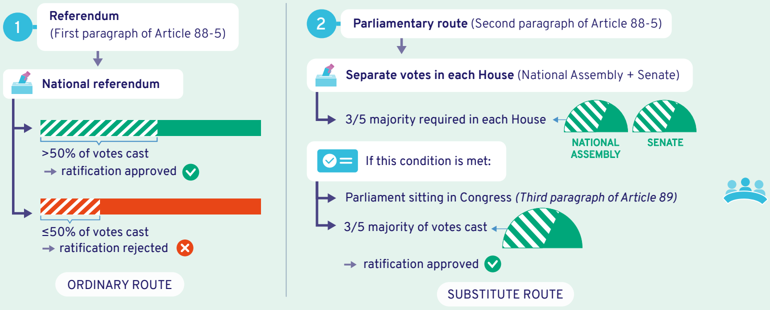
A French constitutional peculiarity: ratification by referendum

> « Any government bill authorizing the ratification of a treaty pertaining to the accession of a state to the European Union shall be submitted to referendum by the president of the republic. Notwithstanding the foregoing, by passing a motion adopted in identical terms in each House by a three-fifths majority, Parliament may authorize the passing of the bill according to the procedure provided for in paragraph three of article 89. »
> (Article 88-5 of the French Constitution of 4 October 1958)

→ Provision never applied to date and with no equivalent in any other EU Member State.

→ Principle of a referendum, with the possibility of parliamentary ratification by a three-fifths majority – an option highly unlikely given the current fragmentation of Parliament

Article 89, paragraph 3: adoption of a constitutional revision bill by Parliament sitting in Congress by a three-fifths majority of the votes cast



1 **Referendum** (First paragraph of Article 88-5)

National referendum

>50% of votes cast
→ ratification approved ✓

≤50% of votes cast
→ ratification rejected ✗

ORDINARY ROUTE

2 **Parliamentary route** (Second paragraph of Article 88-5)

Separate votes in each House (National Assembly + Senate)

3/5 majority required in each House

If this condition is met:

Parliament sitting in Congress (*Third paragraph of Article 89*)

3/5 majority of votes cast

→ ratification approved ✓

SUBSTITUTE ROUTE

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