

THE RENEWED IMPETUS TO THE EUROPEAN UNION ENLARGEMENT: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CLOSER TIES BETWEEN THE EU AND ARMENIA

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Abstract

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has triggered a renewed impetus for the EU's Enlargement Policy, which has acquired geopolitical significance with the unprecedented inclusion of three Eastern partners under this framework, together with the revitalization of negotiations with the Western Balkans. Following Aldecoa's understanding of enlargement as a process that implies a restructuring of the EU's political system, there is also a need to address internal reforms to accommodate this new wave of accession. The consideration of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine as candidate countries has changed the *raison d'être* of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). Originally conceived for states without clear prospects of EU integration, the ENP's purpose has shifted, effectively opening the door for further integration of other Eastern Partnership countries into the European Union. In this context, Armenia is enhancing its relations with the EU, seeking closer integration, and even sparking debates in the country about formally requesting membership. Major challenges ahead may include the need to consolidate democracy, reverse its economic and military integration with Russia, and reach a peace agreement with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Keywords: European Union, enlargement, Armenia, European Neighborhood Policy, Eastern Partnership.

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Introduction

Russia's aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has fostered a shared recognition within the European Union (EU) of the strategic importance of its Enlargement Policy, which is now frequently described as a "geopolitical investment".¹ An envisaged "Europe of the 36"² would include six countries in the Western Balkans – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, which already had membership prospects before 2022. Together with these, three countries from the Eastern Partnership (EaP) framework – Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have recently obtained candidate status. Before the onset of the war, these countries lacked clear prospects for accession. This was partly a consequence of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) being incorporated under the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), which, at its inception, was intended to offer neighboring partners "all but institutions",³ thereby effectively excluding them from the EU's Enlargement Policy. As a result, these three countries did not fall under this framework until 2022, even though the Association Agreements and DCFTAs (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas) they signed with the EU between 2013 and 2014 recognized their European aspirations.

Against this backdrop, a sort of enlargement awakening is taking place in the EU, accelerating negotiations with candidate countries that were previously stalled. It is noteworthy that this marks the longest period since 1973 in which the EU has not admitted new members. More than twelve years have passed since Croatia joined the EU in 2013, and, even under the most optimistic scenarios, the next enlargement is not expected to take place until at least 2030.⁴ This renewed impetus has considerably impacted the dynamics in the Eastern neighborhood, where the three partners not covered under the enlargement umbrella – Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – are adopting very different courses of action. While Lukashenko's regime in Belarus remains as distant as possible from European integration due to its complicity with the Russian actions in Ukraine, Aliyev's government in Azerbaijan has shown very little interest in integration, if any at all. In contrast, Armenia is strengthening its ties with the EU, particularly since Baku's offensive over

¹ European Commission, 2023 *Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, November 8 2023).

² Sandor Zsiros, "Scholz cree que la UE deberá reformarse para dar cabida a nuevos países," *Euronews*, August 29 2022, <https://es.euronews.com/business/2022/08/29/scholz-cree-que-la-ue-debera-reformarse-para-dar-cabida-a-nuevos-paises>.

³ European Commission, *A Wider Europe — A Proximity Policy as the Key to Stability: Peace, Security and Stability, International Dialogue and the Role of the EU* (December 6 2002).

⁴ Lili Bayer, "Charles Michel: Get Ready by 2030 to Enlarge EU," *Politico*, August 28 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-council-president-charles-michel-eu-enlargement-by-2030/>.

Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023, even initiating debates within the country about formally applying for membership.

In light of these developments, this article seeks to examine the significance of the European Union's upcoming enlargement—described as a geopolitical investment—in the context of Europe's response to the war between Russia and Ukraine. Moreover, it analyses the impact of the renewed momentum for enlargement in EU-Armenia relations, addressing the opportunity for closer integration despite major challenges ahead. These considerations may include consolidating democratic reforms, diversifying economic and military relationships to mitigate dependence on Russia, and attaining a peace agreement with Azerbaijan.

The Significance of the EU Enlargement: Beyond the Mere Arithmetic Addition of Member States

For this article's analysis, we adopt an academic perspective that goes beyond the understanding of the enlargement as a mere arithmetic addition of Member States to the EU. Instead, Francisco Aldecoa discusses how the accession of new countries entails a significant transformative process, both internally, as the EU prepares and adapts itself for a larger Union, and externally, as candidate countries are required to undertake reforms and absorb the EU's *acquis communautaire*. Therefore, it continues a “process that implies a restructuring of the political system of European construction as a consequence of the incorporation of new Member States”⁵. From this perspective, enlargement can be understood within the context of the European Union's ongoing dilemma between deepening integration and expanding membership. In other words, for enlargement to be successful and not to pose risks to the functioning of the institutions, prior internal reform is necessary.

Following this logic, Aldecoa identifies four distinct waves of enlargement in the history of the EU. The first wave, in 1973, brought Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom into the European Community. At that time, enlargement slowed the process of deeper integration, strengthening the intergovernmental voices to the detriment of federalists.

The second wave then occurred in two phases: first with the accession of Greece in 1981, followed by Portugal and Spain in 1986. In contrast to the first, this round of enlargement accelerated the integration, ultimately resulting in the Treaty of Maastricht, which transformed the European Economic Community into a more politically unified European Union.

⁵ Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga and Eduardo García Cancela, *La Unión Europea: De la Idea Utópica de Europa a la Unión Europea como Potencia Mundial* (Shackleton Books, 2023).

The third wave took place in 1995 with the accession of Austria, Finland, and Sweden—countries Aldecoa refers to as “net contributors,” given that they were not primary recipients of EU cohesion funds. Their entry helped pave the way for the next round of enlargements.

The fourth wave, driven by the objective of peacefully unifying Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain, encompassed the enlargements of 2004 (Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia), 2007 (Bulgaria and Romania), and 2013 (Croatia).

Moreover, on February 1, 2020, the United Kingdom withdrew from the EU, following the mandate of the Brexit referendum in June 2016. This reduced the number of Member States from 28 to 27. Coincidentally, over the last five years, the Union has faced major challenges that have enhanced its federal dimension. Notable examples include the joint purchase of vaccines or the issuance of common debt to finance the COVID-19 recovery plans and the Next Generation Fund. The EU’s response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has also involved unprecedented developments in its foreign, security, and defense policies.⁶ Without the United Kingdom, the European institutions and Member States have shown an unexpected cohesion and capacity to act.

However, these *de facto* federal advances have not been consolidated *de jure* through a reform of the Treaties.⁷ Consequently, alongside the current renewed impetus for enlargement, there is also a pressing need for further deepening of the Union. In this regard, the primary obstacle to the accession of new Members is the requirement for unanimity in the European Council’s decision-making, which limits the EU’s capacity to act decisively on the global stage. In other words, the addition of more voices to the table could lead to persistent obstruction of the institutions. Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the Union’s Treaties have not been amended. The European Parliament has called for a Convention to reform the Treaties three times since 2020, most recently in November 2023,⁸ but it is still awaiting a decision by the Council.

Legally, the Enlargement Policy is regulated by Article 49 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU), which establishes the conditions for a country to join the EU. It begins as follows: “Any European State which respects the values referred

⁶ Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga and Luis Norberto González Alonso, eds., *La Unión Europea frente a la Agresión a Ucrania* (Editorial Catarata, 2022).

⁷ Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga and Eduardo García Cancela, eds., *Las Claves de la Profundización y Ampliación de la Unión Europea tras la Agresión a Ucrania* (Editorial Catarata, 2024).

⁸ European Parliament, *European Parliament Resolution of 22 November 2023 on Proposals of the European Parliament for the Amendment of the Treaties* (November 22 2023), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0427_EN.html.

to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union". According to this formulation, it establishes at least two clear conditions for countries aspiring to membership. On the one hand, there is a geographical factor, as it implies that only "European" states can apply, though this continues to prompt debate over the precise boundaries of the continent.

Secondly, there is a normative dimension, requiring applicant countries to share the common values that underpin the EU, within their domestic policies and in their external relations (i.e. respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities). Additionally, the Copenhagen Criteria, established by the European Council during its June 1993 meeting in Copenhagen, highlight the fundamental economic, political, and social reforms required of candidate states before accession.⁹

In this sense, enlargement should not be viewed solely as a process in which the candidate countries implement the necessary reforms to meet the conditions and requirements for accession stipulated by the EU. It also requires the Union to prepare itself to accommodate these new members and to avoid political and institutional paralysis. Therefore, to ensure the success of future enlargements, prior reform of the Treaties is necessary. In fact, the Strategic Agenda elaborated by the European Council in July 2024, which sets EU's political orientations for the next five years, identifies "preparing for a bigger and stronger Union" as one of its main priorities, calling for "a merit-based EU enlargement process with incentives, to run in parallel with necessary internal reforms".¹⁰ Also in July 2024, Ursula Von der Leyen delivered the Political Guidelines for the next European Commission, which included the commitment to enlargement, but did not mention a plan to amend the Treaties.¹¹ Hence, the key for the EU in this new term (2024-2029) is to find a way to make both the deepening of integration and the enlargement possible.

The Fifth Wave of Enlargement: A Geopolitical Investment

According to Aldecoa's classification, the current renewed impetus would fit as the fifth wave of enlargement. As stated in the introduction and discussed further below, the primary factor driving the acceleration of decisions on this issue is the European response to the war between Russia and Ukraine. Although Russia's actions

⁹ EUR-Lex, "Accession Criteria (Copenhagen Criteria)," accessed May 20 2025, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/accession-criteria-copenhagen-criteria.html>.

¹⁰ European Council, Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 (July 2024), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/yxrc05pz/sn02167en24_web.pdf.

¹¹ European Commission, *Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission* (July 2024), https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en.

are directed against a third state, they have nonetheless posed a threat to the EU. On February 24, 2022, the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, stated, “It is not our war, but it is our security, that is why we must support Ukraine with all the means at our disposal”.¹² In another interview in October 2023, Borrell further asserted that “the EU is risking its survival”.¹³ In this context, the Russian invasion in Ukraine have been interpreted as an attack on the European model of society—a model the EU seeks to promote internationally and which is grounded in a system of norms and values, such as democracy and the protection of human rights,¹⁴ as enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU).

In the face of this situation, and despite significant limitations in competences and decision-making mechanisms in foreign, security, and defense policy, the EU has managed to deliver a rapid and effective response through its three main institutions.¹⁵ Moreover, this response has been continuously renewed, reflecting a significant degree of cohesion between the institutions and the Member States, even if, at times, it has been necessary to employ creative formulas to circumvent vetoes from countries such as Hungary.¹⁶ On May 20, 2025, the Council adopted the 17th package of sanctions against Russia.¹⁷ At the same time, unprecedented assistance has been provided to Ukraine, amounting to almost 147.9 billion euros, including 77 billion euros in financial, economic, and humanitarian aid, 50.3 billion euros in military assistance, mainly through the European Peace Facility instrument, and 17

¹² “Borrell: Estamos ante una guerra de verdad a las puertas de Europa y no sabemos hasta dónde va a llegar,” *RTVE.es*, February 24 2022, <https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20220224/borrell-alerta-guerra-ucrania-afecta-seguridad-ue/2296321.shtml>.

¹³ María R. Sahuquillo, “Borrell advierte de que la UE se juega su supervivencia en la guerra de Rusia contra Ucrania,” *El País*, October 2 2023, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2023-10-02/borrell-advierte-de-que-la-ue-se-juega-su-supervivencia-en-la-guerra-de-rusia-contra-ucrania.html>.

¹⁴ Mariola Urrea Corres, “La Agresión Rusa a Ucrania como Amenaza al Orden Liberal: La Respuesta Firme de una Europa Unida,” in Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga, coord., *La Agresión Rusa a Ucrania y sus Consecuencias para el Relanzamiento de la Unión Europea* (Servicio Editorial de la Universidad del País Vasco, 2023).

¹⁵ Mercedes Guinea Llorente, “La Invasión de Ucrania: Un Revulsivo que Sacudía los Cimientos de la Unión Europea,” in Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga and Luis Norberto González Alonso, eds., *La Unión Europea frente a la Agresión a Ucrania* (Editorial Catarata, 2022).

¹⁶ Beatriz Navarro, “Los Líderes Europeos Sortean el Veto Húngaro y Abren Negociaciones con Ucrania y Moldavia,” *La Vanguardia*, December 14 2023, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20231214/9450961/lideres-ue-deciden-abrir-negociaciones-ingreso-ucrania-moldavia.html>.

¹⁷ Council of the EU, “Russia’s War of Aggression against Ukraine: EU Agrees 17th Package of Sanctions,” press release, May 20 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/20/russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-eu-agrees-17th-package-of-sanctions/>.

billion euros in support for Ukrainian refugees in Europe.¹⁸ It is also noteworthy that, as of November 15, 2022, the EU launched the Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM Ukraine), through which the Ukrainian army is receiving military training on European soil.¹⁹

In this context, since 2022, the geopolitical dimension of the Enlargement Policy has been emphasized in various official documents and statements. For instance, the 2023 Communication of the European Commission on enlargement identified the accession of new Members as “a geostrategic investment”, highlighting a stronger focus on the alignment of the candidate countries with the EU’s foreign, security, and defense policy. In short, the text presented enlargement as inevitable, an unavoidable necessity and responsibility, and directly linked to the response against the Russian invasion in Ukraine.²⁰

One year after the start of the new legislature in the EU, following the elections to the European Parliament in June 2024, the association of enlargement with strengthening the Union’s geopolitical influence has only increased. The previously referred Strategic Agenda of the European Council stresses, “the new geopolitical reality underscores the importance of enlargement as a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity”.²¹ On the other hand, the Political Guidelines for the European Commission define enlargement as a “geopolitical imperative”. In that document, Von der Leyen argued that an enlarged Union “helps reduce our dependencies, enhances our resilience and strengthens our competitiveness [...] and can help anchor democracy, stability and the rule of law across Europe.”²²

Moreover, the 2024 European Commission’s Communication on the Enlargement Policy (published on October 30, 2024) has maintained this core argument: “the three membership applications from the EU’s eastern neighbors in the wake of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2022, and the ensuing decisions by the European Council, are further testimony of the geopolitical weight of EU enlargement”.²³ More recently, on May 9, 2025, the joint statement by the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, the President of the European Council, An-

¹⁸ European Council, “Russia’s War against Ukraine,” accessed May 22 2025, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/topics/russia-s-war-against-ukraine/>.

¹⁹ “Ayuda a Ucrania: Formación de Militares Ucranianos,” *Revista Española de Defensa*, December 2022, 16–19, <https://www.defensa.gob.es/Galerias/gabinete/red/2022/12/p-16-19-red-400-ayuda.pdf>.

²⁰ European Commission, 2023 *Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*.

²¹ European Council, *Strategic Agenda 2024-2029*.

²² European Commission, *Political guidelines for the next European Commission*.

²³ European Commission, 2024 *Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, October 30 2024), https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/-download/7c67aed6-e7c2-47de-b3f8-b3edd26a3e26_en.

tonio Costa, and the President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, on the 75th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration once again characterized enlargement as a “geopolitical investment”.²⁴ Consequently, the heightened sense of vulnerability created by the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine has profoundly influenced the direction of the EU’s Enlargement Policy, accelerating its progress and positioning the prospect of a fifth wave of enlargement as a strategic priority that reinforces the Union’s geopolitical influence.

The EU’s Enlargement Awakening Following Russia’s Aggression against Ukraine

On February 28, 2022, four days after the beginning of Russia’s aggression, Ukraine formally applied for EU membership, a decision also taken by Moldova and Georgia on March 3. In less than four months, the European Council, at its meeting on June 23 and 24, 2022, recognized these three states as subjects of the Enlargement Policy, following a favorable recommendation from the European Commission.²⁵ As a result, the Council granted Ukraine and Moldova official candidate status and designated Georgia as a potential candidate. A year and a half later, at its meeting on December 14, 2023, the European Council reaffirmed this decision by opening accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and granting Georgia candidate status.

These decisions are particularly noteworthy given the speed with which they were made, especially in comparison to the slower dynamics that characterized the Enlargement Policy before the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. For instance, Montenegro and Serbia, the only two candidates, except for Turkey, that had managed to start negotiations before February 2022, took much longer. Montenegro applied for membership in December 2008, obtained candidate status in December 2010, and began accession negotiations in June 2012.²⁶ Similarly, Serbia made the formal application in December 2009 and was recognized as a candidate in March 2012, and had to wait until January 2014 for the negotiations to commence.²⁷

²⁴ European Parliament, European Commission, and European Council, *Joint Statement on the 75th Anniversary of the Schuman Declaration* (May 9 2025), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250508IPR28309/joint-statement-on-the-75th-anniversary-of-the-schuman-declaration>.

²⁵ European Council, *European Council*, 23–24 June 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2022/06/23-24/>.

²⁶ European Council, “EU Enlargement Policy: Montenegro,” <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/policies/enlargement/montenegro/>.

²⁷ European Council, “EU Enlargement Policy: Serbia,” <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/policies/enlargement-serbia/>.

For these reasons, the Western Balkan countries initially viewed these developments with skepticism and called for a stronger commitment from the EU regarding their integration aspirations.²⁸ However, since July 2022, the acceleration of accession negotiations has also extended to this region. At that time, the Council agreed to open the first negotiation chapters with Albania and North Macedonia.²⁹ Subsequently, Bosnia and Herzegovina obtained candidate status (December 2022)³⁰, and Kosovo achieved a visa liberalization regime in April 2023, which entered into force on January 1, 2024,³¹ among other developments. As of May 2025, the new Commissioner for Enlargement, Marta Kos,³² and the President of the European Council, Antonio Costa,³³ have suggested that Albania and Montenegro could be the first two countries to join the EU by 2030.

On the other hand, the inclusion of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in the Enlargement Policy has changed the *raison d'être* of the ENP,³⁴ a framework of which these three countries are part, together with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus, in its Eastern dimension, the EaP. Originally, the ENP was designed to establish relationships with the neighboring countries that would offer “all but institutions”, as stated by then Commission President Romano Prodi in 2002.³⁵ In other words, their membership in the EU was not contemplated. In other words, in the Association Agreements signed with these countries in 2013 (Georgia and Moldova) and 2014 (Ukraine), the EU limited itself to acknowledging their “European aspirations and European choice” in the preamble, an approach that fell short of recognizing them as future potential candidates for membership. Nevertheless, two decades after the launch of the ENP, the Council decisions of June 2022 and December 2023 have

²⁸ “Balkan Countries Warn That EU Loses Credibility in Accession Process,” *Euractiv*, June 23 2022, <https://euroefe.euractiv.es/section/ampliacion/news/paises-balcanicos-avisan-ue-pierde-credibilidad-proceso-adhesi/>.

²⁹ Dani Rovirosa and Laura Zornoza, “EU Opens Accession Negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia,” *Euractiv*, July 19 2022, <https://euroefe.euractiv.es/section/ampliacion/news/la-ue-abre-las-negociaciones-de-adhesi-de-albania-y-macedonia-del-norte/>.

³⁰ European Council, “EU Enlargement Policy: Bosnia and Herzegovina,” <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/policies/enlargement/bosnia-herzegovina/>.

³¹ European Commission, “Visa-Free Travel for Kosovo Citizens to the EU,” January 3 2024, https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/visa-free-travel-kosovo-citizens-eu-2024-01-03_en.

³² Swissinfo, “Comisaria de Ampliación Ve ‘Muy Realista’ Nuevas Adhesiones a la UE en 2030,” Swissinfo, May 13 2025, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/comisaria-de-ampliacion-ve-muy-realista-nuevas-adhesiones-a-la-ue-en-2030/89312809>.

³³ “Albania y Montenegro Podrían Entrar en la UE Antes que los Demás, Dice Costa a ‘Euronews’,” *Euronews*, May 12 2025, <https://es.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/05/12/antonio-costa-impulsa-la-adhesi-a-la-ue-de-los-balcanes-con-una-gira-por-seis-paises>.

³⁴ Eduardo García Cancela, “¿Todo y También las Instituciones? La Vecindad Oriental de la UE tras la CoFoE y la Agresión Rusa a Ucrania,” in Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga and Mercedes Guinea Llorente, eds., *Una Unión Europea Necesitada de Reforma: Hacia la Tercera Convención Europea* (Catarata, 2022).

³⁵ European Commission, *A Wider Europe — A Proximity Policy as the Key to Stability*.

fundamentally altered its character, effectively opening the door of the EU to all three of its Eastern neighbors.

Although the Commission's communications on the Enlargement Policy cover ten countries, a "Europe of 36" implies an addition of nine new Members to the current 27. Therefore, the fifth wave of enlargement is directed at six countries in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia), and three Eastern partners (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). This would exclude Turkey, which has been a candidate for membership since 2005, but with whom the EU has frozen accession negotiations since 2018.³⁶ Of these nine countries, eight already have official candidate status—all except Kosovo, informally considered a potential candidate.

However, at its meeting on June 27, 2024, the European Council decided to effectively halt Georgia's accession process following the adoption of the so-called "foreign agents' law", which runs counter to the EU values.³⁷ As a result of democratic backsliding, Georgia now risks facing the same stalled prospects as Turkey. In July 2024, the EU suspended financial aid to Georgia³⁸, and in November, the Georgian government cancelled enlargement discussions with Brussels until the end of 2028.³⁹ Furthermore, leaders such as Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk are advocating in the European Council for the revocation of the EU's visa-free regime with Georgia.⁴⁰

Given the heterogeneity among candidate countries and their varying degrees of harmonization with the *acquis communautaire*, the fifth wave of enlargement could take place in several phases, as was the case in the 1980s with the accession of Greece, Portugal, and Spain, or with the successive rounds of enlargements in the early twenty-first century.⁴¹ Consequently, some candidates still have a considerable path ahead before accession.

³⁶ European Commission, 2023 *Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*.

³⁷ European Council, "EU Enlargement Policy: Georgia,"

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/georgia/>.

³⁸ "Georgia Accession Process De Facto Halted as EU Calls on Government to Change Course," *EU Neighbours East*, October 30 2024, <https://euneighbourseast.eu/news/latest-news/georgia-accession-process-de-facto-halted-as-eu-calls-on-government-to-change-course/>.

³⁹ Lucy Davalou and Andrew Naughtie, "Georgian Prime Minister Suspends EU Membership Talks until End of 2028," *Euronews*, November 28 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/11/28/georgian-prime-minister-suspends-eu-membership-talks-until-end-of-2028>.

⁴⁰ Robin Fabbro and Dominik K. Cagara, "Poland's Tusk Is 'Building Majority in EU' to Revoke Georgia Visa-Free Access," *OC Media*, June 11 2025, <https://oc-media.org/polands-tusk-is-building-majority-in-eu-to-revoke-georgia-visa-free-access/>.

⁴¹ Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga, "La Ampliación de la Unión Europea en el Debate Permanente con la Profundización," *Grand Place* 21 (2024).

With this in mind, and to promote common political objectives before enlargement—as well as to coordinate positions on issues such as security, defense, and support for Ukraine—the European Political Community (EPC) was launched in October 2022. This new forum brings together all European Heads of State and Government (47 in total), except Russia, Belarus, and the Holy See.⁴² Two out of the six summits held so far have taken place in candidate countries: Chisinau (June 2023) and Tirana (May 2025).⁴³⁴⁴ In addition, Armenia and Azerbaijan are expected to host EPC’s summits in 2026 and 2028, respectively. The EPC provides further avenues for bilateral and multilateral engagement among the EU, enlargement candidates, and neighboring countries, which is essential given the renewed momentum for enlargement.⁴⁵

The Renewed Momentum for Enlargement: An Opportunity to Enhance EU-Armenia Relations

In parallel with the renewed momentum gained by the EU’s Enlargement Policy, relations between Yerevan and Brussels have experienced increased ambition, including debates in Armenia about formally applying for EU membership. As previously mentioned, the participation of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in the enlargement framework since 2022 has considerably impacted the dynamics in the Eastern neighborhood.⁴⁶ In the case of Armenia, since the inception of the EaP in 2009, the country has aspired to be part of the group of neighbors with deeper European integration.⁴⁷ In 2013, Armenia concluded negotiations with the EU on an Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area

⁴² Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga, “Nace una Nueva Organización Confederal: La Comunidad Política Europea,” *InfoLibre*, October 9 2022, https://www.infolibre.es/opinion/plaza-publica/nace-nueva-organizacion-confederal-comunidad-politica-europea_129_1334876.html.

⁴³ In the last summit of the European Political Community in Tirana (Albania), in May 2025, there were 47 participant states: the 27 EU Members, the 10 countries under EU’s Enlargement Policy, and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and four microstates (Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco and San Marino).

⁴⁴ “European Political Community Summit in Tirana: Europe Is Awake and Ready to Preserve Peace,” *European Western Balkans*, May 17 2025, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2025/05/17/european-political-community-summit-in-tirana-europe-is-awake-and-ready-to-preserve-peace/>.

⁴⁵ Alexander Pracht, “Yerevan to Host European Political Community Summit in 2026,” *CivilNet*, May 24 2025, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/952633/yerevan-to-host-european-political-community-summit-in-2026/>.

⁴⁶ Tamara Gagua, “La Agresión Rusa a Ucrania y sus Consecuencias en el Vecindario Este,” in Francisco Aldecoa Luzárraga, *La Agresión Rusa a Ucrania y sus Consecuencias para el Relanzamiento de la Unión Europea* (Servicio Editorial de la Universidad del País Vasco, 2023).

⁴⁷ Kristi Raik, “A Rocky Road towards Europe: The Prospects for the EU’s Eastern Partnership Association Agreements,” *Finnish Institute of International Affairs*, no. 110 (2012), <https://www.fiiia.fi/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/bp110.pdf>.

(AA/DCFTA). However, this agreement was ultimately set aside following President Serzh Sargsyan's visit to Moscow, where he announced Armenia's decision to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).⁴⁸

Despite this setback, the scenario has changed considerably since 2013. First, in 2017, the EU and Armenia managed to sign an *ad hoc* agreement, the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which preserved nearly all elements of the AA, although leaving out the DCFTA.⁴⁹ In this way, an EU-Armenia cooperation framework was secured, which, although more limited, allows for some convergence and respects Armenia's commitments to the EAEU.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, unlike the AAs signed with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, the CEPA does not acknowledge Armenia's European aspirations. On the other hand, the Velvet Revolution of April 2018—an unprecedented, peaceful social movement largely directed against political corruption—led to the resignation of President Sargsyan.⁵¹ Nikol Pashinyan, the leader of the protests, was elected Prime Minister, initiating a democratic transformation of the country grounded in the reforms outlined in the CEPA.⁵²

However, a turning point in relations between the EU and Armenia came with the change in the *status quo* in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as a result of the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh, and especially after Azerbaijan's offensive in September 2023.⁵³ One of the most remarkable developments was the launching of the EU's civilian mission to patrol Armenia's side of the border with Azerbaijan, the EUMA, in February 2023.⁵⁴ Since then, Armenia has begun to gradually distance

⁴⁸ Ter-Matevosyan, Vahram, Anna Drnoian, Narek Mkrtchyan, and Tigran Yeremyan. 2017. "Armenia in the Eurasian Economic Union: Reasons for Joining and Its Consequences." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 58 (3): 340–60. <https://doi:10.1080/15387216.2017.1360193>.

⁴⁹ Hrant Kostanyan and Richard Giragosian, "EU-Armenian Relations: Charting a Fresh Course," Centre for European Policy Studies, November 14 2017.

⁵⁰ Maral Tavitian, "Armenia's Tricky EU-Russia Balancing Act," *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 5 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/interview/armenias-tricky-eu-russia-balancing-act>.

⁵¹ Olesya Vartanyan, "Velvet Revolution Takes Armenia into the Unknown," *International Crisis Group*, 2018.

⁵² Tobias Schumacher and Cengiz Günay, "Territorial Conflict, Domestic Crises, and the Covid-19 Pandemic in the South Caucasus: Explaining Variegated EU Responses," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 59 (2021): 137–149.

⁵³ Faustine Vincent, "After Russia's 'Betrayal,' Armenia Seeks New Allies to Ensure Its Security," *Le Monde*, November 27 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/11/27/after-russia-s-betrayal-armenia-seeks-new-allies-to-ensure-its-security_6291681_4.html.

⁵⁴ Sossi Tatikyan, "Why Is the EU Deploying a Mission in Armenia and What to Expect?" *EVN Report*, February 20 2023, <https://evnreport.com/politics/why-is-the-eu-deploying-a-mission-in-armenia-and-what-to-expect/>.

itself from Russia, considering that Moscow has failed to fulfil its security guarantees,⁵⁵ opening a window of opportunity for a closer association with the EU.

Further than that, on October 17, 2023, Pashinyan delivered a speech in the European Parliament in which he stated: “Armenia is ready to be closer to the European Union, as much as the European Union considers it possible”⁵⁶ In turn, the European institutions are welcoming this renewed momentum. In November 2023, a delegation from the European Commission and the European External Action Service conducted a “fact-finding mission” to examine in detail the areas where convergence between Armenia and the EU could be accelerated and deepened.⁵⁷ More importantly, the European Parliament passed a resolution on March 12, 2024, in support of Armenia’s renewed European aspirations and called for its inclusion in the EU Enlargement Policy.⁵⁸

In parallel, the pro-European civil society in Armenia launched a citizens’ initiative to request a referendum about the country’s accession to the EU.⁵⁹ The campaign obtained more than 60,000 signatures, which allowed for its debate on the National Assembly (Parliament) of Armenia.⁶⁰ Consequently, on March 26, 2025, the National Assembly passed a bill for “the initiation of the process of accession of Armenia to the EU”.⁶¹ Nevertheless, as of May 2025, the country has not yet formally applied for EU membership, mostly due to potential internal and geopolitical implications, although there are signs among the political elite showing that they are carefully considering it.⁶²

⁵⁵ Gabriel Gavin, “We Can’t Rely on Russia to Protect Us Anymore, Armenian PM Says,” *Politico*, September 13 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/we-cant-rely-russia-protect-us-anymore-nikol-pashinyan-armenia-pm/>.

⁵⁶ Office of the Prime Minister of Armenia, “Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s Speech at the European Parliament,” October 17 2023, <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2023/10/17/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>.

⁵⁷ European External Action Service, “EU Fact-Finding Mission to Armenia,” November 24 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/armenia/eu-fact-finding-mission-armenia_en.

⁵⁸ European Parliament, Joint Motion for a Resolution on Closer Ties between the EU and Armenia and the Need for a Peace Agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, March 12 2024, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2024-0163_EN.html.

⁵⁹ Alexander Pracht, “What Motivates Armenians to Call for a Referendum on Joining the EU?” *CivilNet*, October 22 2024, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/802079/what-motivates-armenians-to-call-for-a-referendum-on-joining-the-eu/>.

⁶⁰ “Armenian EU Membership Referendum Backers Gather More Signatures than Required,” *JAM News*, November 7 2024, <https://jam-news.net/armenian-eu-membership-referendum-backers-gather-more-signatures-than-required/>.

⁶¹ European Parliament, Joint Statement on the Adoption by the National Assembly of Armenia of the Law on the Initiation of the Process of Accession of Armenia to the EU, March 26 2025, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/es/product/product-details/20250326DPU39920>.

⁶² Gian Volpicelli, “Armenia Mulling EU Membership Application, Foreign Minister Says,” *Politico*, March 9 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/armenia-mulling-eu-membership-application-foreign-minister-mirzoyan-says/>.

Particularly, the success of the Georgian application for membership, with granted official candidate status since December 2023, has allowed Armenia to consider this possibility. Before 2022, it was unclear whether countries in the South Caucasus could achieve this milestone. The region, which borders Asia Minor, Central Asia, and the Middle East,⁶³ struggles to geographically comply with Article 49 of the TEU, which stipulates that any “European” state that embraces and “respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply for membership of the Union.” While the geographical criterion of Article 49 was interpreted flexibly in previous cases, such as Cyprus, it remained ambiguous for the South Caucasus until Georgia’s application was considered in 2022—a development that effectively opens the door for Armenia as well.

Beyond this, the possibility of including Armenia in the European Union’s enlargement policy presents an opportunity for Brussels and underscores the geopolitical significance of the new wave of enlargement. On the one hand, it would consolidate its presence in the South Caucasus, which has grown over the last two years, particularly through the deployment of the EUMA, and which is gaining strategic importance amid setbacks in Georgia. At the same time, the EU has shown support for Pashinyan’s Crossroads of Peace plan and has announced funding for key infrastructure projects such as the North-South corridor through its Global Gateway investment agenda.⁶⁴ This can be seen as an attempt to fill the vacuum and avoid other regional players from owning strategic roads, while enhancing Armenia’s sovereignty. In addition, the EU is genuinely interested in improving the connectivity between Europe and Central Asia, for which the normalization of relations between Armenia and its neighbors (Azerbaijan and Turkey) can be a “game changer”.⁶⁵ Within the enlargement framework, further investment in strategic infrastructure and an increased EU presence can be expected, along with the allocation of more European funds.

On the other hand, as highlighted by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, one of the objectives of EU enlargement is to “help anchor democracy, stability and the rule of law across Europe”.⁶⁶ The inclusion of Armenia in the EU’s Enlargement Policy would bring both greater scrutiny and support to the democratic reforms being implemented in the country. This would not only help consolidate the democratic transition and normative convergence but would also

⁶³ Thomas De Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁶⁴ European Commission, *Joint Communication to ... The Global Gateway* (JOIN(2021) 30 final) (December 1 2021), https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway_en.

⁶⁵ “Opening of Azerbaijani, Turkish Borders with Armenia ‘Game Changer’ for EU,” *Azatutyun*, April 4 2025, <https://www.azatutyun.am/a/33373893.html>.

⁶⁶ European Commission, *Political guidelines for the next European Commission*.

ensure that the investments already made by the EU in Armenia yield a positive and sustainable impact.

Armenia's Main Challenges on the Path Toward a Potential EU Membership Bid

Despite the renewed impetus for enhancing the EU-Armenia relations, there are various major challenges that Yerevan faces on its European path,⁶⁷ especially when analyzing a potential bid for membership. Among others, it is worth mentioning at least four that have become the most obvious. First, enlargement negotiations continue to be perceived in Brussels as merit-based processes. Therefore, democratic reforms need to be consolidated, fully implementing the CEPA provisions, and especially tackling disinformation and political polarization.

Secondly, Armenia must reverse its integration with Russia, withdrawing from the EAEU and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and terminating contracts allowing Russian troops to stay in Armenia. This cannot be accomplished overnight and presents significant economic and geopolitical challenges for Armenia, particularly as its economy becomes increasingly dependent on its Eurasian partners each year. In addition, the EU or its Member States would need to provide security guarantees to Yerevan—an issue that remains highly complex and has not yet been proposed by Brussels. In other words, seriously pursuing integration in the EU would put an end, or distort considerably, Armenia's traditional foreign policy doctrine of complementarity between Russia and the West⁶⁸, which requires serious efforts and careful consideration of its consequences.

Third, resolving all outstanding issues with Azerbaijan is essential. Yerevan's willingness to reach a peace agreement with Baku has been welcomed in Brussels.⁶⁹ However, since the announcement of the finalization of negotiations on March 13, 2025, the Aliyev regime has maintained a bellicose stance and introduced new conditions for Armenia. Of particular concern is the agreed withdrawal of foreign missions from the region, which directly affects the EUMA, as well as the demand for Armenia to withdraw its lawsuits against Azerbaijan at the Interna-

⁶⁷ “Armenia National Assembly Votes for Starting EU Accession Bid,” *Le Monde*, March 26 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/europe/article/2025/03/26/armenia-national-assembly-votes-for-starting-eu-accession-bid_6739535_143.html.

⁶⁸ Narek Galstyan, “The Main Dimensions of Armenia's Foreign and Security Policy,” Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, March 2023, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/162794/cd67865d0fcfef431b21f3e4bbe5e020.pdf>.

⁶⁹ European External Action Service, “Armenia/Azerbaijan: Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Regarding the Finalisation of Negotiations on Armenia/Azerbaijan Peace Treaty,” March 14 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/armeniaazerbaijan-statement-high-representativevice-president-regarding-finalisation-negotiations_en.

tional Court of Justice.⁷⁰ These developments could hinder Armenia's closer relationship with the EU. At the most recent European Political Community summit in Tirana on May 16, 2025, Pashinyan and Aliyev held a brief meeting, in which they reaffirmed their commitment to sign the agreement.⁷¹ However, despite the readiness shown by Armenia, the Azerbaijani timeline is rather uncertain, which, along with the mentioned bellicose rhetoric, raises questions about Baku's willingness to resolve the conflict in the first place.

Finally, the deterioration of democracy in Georgia presents another challenge to Armenia's European aspirations. Tbilisi's progress on the European path has come under increased scrutiny⁷² following the adoption of the controversial law on foreign agents,⁷³ which runs counter to the EU values⁷⁴ and sparked widespread pro-European protests.⁷⁵ While this does not technically preclude the possibility of a successful membership bid, it introduces additional challenges to Armenia's prospects for joining the Union.

Conclusions

The outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 has accelerated two processes that are sometimes perceived as incompatible: the deepening of integration and enlargement of the EU. The enlargement cannot simply be understood as a process in which candidate countries undertake the necessary reforms to meet the EU's accession conditions. It also requires the Union to accommodate these new members and avoid political and institutional paralysis. Therefore, to ensure the success of future enlargements, prior internal reform is necessary.

Since 2022, the geopolitical dimension of the EU's Enlargement Policy has been emphasized in various official documents and statements. Also, the renewed momentum for enlargement has significantly impacted the dynamics in the Eastern

⁷⁰ Sossi Tatikyan, "Armenia Pursues Peace, Azerbaijan Seeks Coercion," *EVN Report*, March 31 2025, <https://evnreport.com/politics/armenia-pursues-peace/>.

⁷¹ "Armenia and Azerbaijan's Leaders Meet Briefly in Tirana as Peace Agreement Momentum Continues," *Euronews*, May 19 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/2025/05/17/armenia-and-azerbaijans-leaders-meet-briefly-in-tirana-as-peace-agreement-momentum-continues>.

⁷² Anna Kuchenbecker, "The Geopolitical Tightrope: Balancing Georgia's EU Candidacy," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, October 24 2023, <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-geopolitical-tightrope-balancing-georgias-eu-candidacy>.

⁷³ Liana Fix and Caroline Kapp, "The Dangers of Democratic Backsliding in Georgia," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, June 21 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/article/dangers-democratic-backsliding-georgia>.

⁷⁴ European External Action Service, "Georgia: Statement by the High Representative on the Adoption of the 'Foreign Influence' Law," March 7 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/georgia-statement-high-representative-adoption-%E2%80%9Cforeign-influence%E2%80%9D-law_en.

⁷⁵ Emil Avdaliani, "Playing with Fire: Georgia's Cautious Rapprochement with Russia," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 21 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/90246>.

neighborhood. Particularly, the initial success of Georgia's application has enabled Armenia to consider this possibility, provided it complies with both conditions of Article 49 of the TEU (being an "European" state and embracing the EU's values and norms). Moreover, relations between Yerevan and Brussels have become more ambitious, especially since September 2023, following Azerbaijan's offensive over Nagorno-Karabakh.

However, the deterioration of democracy in Georgia poses a significant challenge to Armenia's European aspirations, alongside other major obstacles. Notably, Armenia must consolidate democratic reforms and fully implement the provisions of the CEPA; it must also reduce its economic and military dependence on Russia, and achieving a peace agreement with Azerbaijan is crucial for ensuring prosperity and stability on the path to European integration.

Despite these challenges, the renewed momentum for EU enlargement presents a real opportunity to strengthen ties between the EU and Armenia, as both sides demonstrate greater ambition to enhance their association. Furthermore, even if negotiations were to take decades—or ultimately fail—due to the aforementioned challenges, Armenia's inclusion in the EU's Enlargement Policy could pave the way for broader and deeper cooperation, as well as increased funding, which would be beneficial for the overall relationship between Brussels and Yerevan.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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