

Thinking Enlarged: Civil Society's Role in Preparing for EU Enlargement

Johannes Greubel
Liza Saris
Constanze Sandler
Vanna Curin

INTRODUCTION

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the prospect of European Union (EU) enlargement has moved from the margins of policy to the centre of the Union's strategic agenda. Leaders across the continent now describe it as a geopolitical imperative. Yet, while rhetorical commitment has intensified, tangible progress remains slow. Candidate countries are increasingly caught between ambitious political declarations and incremental delivery, with public trust in the enlargement process declining in the region and its legitimacy at risk.

This Policy Brief argues that, to restore trust in the enlargement process the EU must engage civil society more in it. The EU needs to "think enlarged",¹ embedding an enlargement dimension into current EU policy debates and involving civil society from candidate countries and potential candidates earlier and more systematically.

BACKGROUND: ENLARGEMENT AS EUROPE'S STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE

The EU and its member states have long recognised enlargement as a geostrategic investment in peace, stability and prosperity in Europe. However, momentum faded after Croatia's accession in 2013 as the Union turned inward, preoccupied with its own permacrisis.²

This changed dramatically after 2022, when EU enlargement moved from a stagnating policy file to a central and constant feature of the EU debate. Russia's

full-scale invasion of Ukraine reframed widening as an urgent, geopolitical necessity, with EU leaders across institutions and member states describing it as an "investment in our collective strength"³ and the "best geopolitical tool"⁴ at the EU's disposal.

Consequently, enlargement features prominently on political agendas in EU institutions and capitals alike. It ranks high in Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's political guidelines for 2024–2029 and the European Council's 2024–2029 Strategic Agenda, which highlights the need to widen beyond the current 27 members and to "undertake the necessary reforms"⁵ to that end.

Russia's invasion also shifted public opinion. The latest polls show that 56% of Europeans now support enlargement,⁶ with 2022, right after the Russian invasion, recording higher approval rates than those recorded during the 2004 "Big Bang" enlargement.⁷

Yet, despite this renewed momentum, tangible progress remains limited. The perceived lack of political will to match words with action has eroded trust between Brussels and prospective EU members.⁸ Doubts about the Union's ability to move forward have created a vicious circle in which internal reform and the enlargement process reinforce each other's stagnation.

At the same time, a fundamental dilemma persists: how to reconcile the urgency of a security-driven enlargement with the need to preserve a merit-based process that underpins successful long-term

integration.⁹ The key challenge is to build trust and political will to advance enlargement in line with geopolitical urgency without compromising the merit-based process.

One answer is that the EU must learn to “think enlarged”: treating aspiring members as integral by embedding them in EU policy debates and involving their civil societies in shaping Europe’s future.

The Union should thus open EU policy debates to their civil societies, embedding citizen voices into the enlargement process and fostering networks across borders. Systematically and sustainably engaging tomorrow’s members in today’s discussions on the future of Europe can strengthen reform momentum, regional buy-in and rebuild bottom-up trust in the process.

The EU must learn to “think enlarged”: treating aspiring members as integral by embedding them in EU policy debates and involving their civil societies in shaping Europe’s future.

STATE OF PLAY: THE ROLE OF CSOs IN THE ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

Drivers and consequences of stagnation

In the previous political cycle (2019–2024)¹⁰ and throughout the most recent institutional transition,¹¹ the Commission reiterated the need for the EU to *deepen while widening*. It had pledged to publish a pre-enlargement policy review in spring 2025¹² However, repeated postponements have pushed its to November 2025, effectively stalling the EU’s own debate on internal reform.¹³

Moreover, while the EU seems committed to accepting new members and supporting candidates through pre-accession programmes, these commitments have remained largely declarative. The lack of political investment and effective implementation mechanisms has undermined the process’s credibility.¹⁴ As enlargement stalls, public support for membership across candidate countries lowers while disillusionment with the EU deepens.¹⁵

Although public opinion in Ukraine and Moldova remains overwhelmingly pro-European, citizens in the Western Balkans have grown weary of promises after two decades of sluggish progress. In Montenegro,

support for EU membership dropped from 60% in 2023 to 39% in 2024; in Serbia, from 51% in 2019 to 34% in 2024.¹⁶ Even traditionally pro-EU Albania saw a significant drop from 92% in 2023 to 77% in 2024.¹⁷

Declining support for enlargement signals not a rejection of the EU itself, but disillusionment with the pace and substance of enlargement.

Despite declining support, outright opposition to EU membership has likewise decreased in past years to around 10% region wide. This signals not a rejection of the EU itself, but disillusionment with the pace and substance of enlargement. As one recent study observes, “citizens appear to be caught in a space of cautious hope or growing indifference.”¹⁸ The risk is that optimism in the Eastern Trio could follow the same downward trend unless the process delivers visible progress.

How CSOs from candidate countries are involved

To strengthen buy-in from aspiring member states and enhance the legitimacy of the enlargement process, the EU must stimulate bottom-up engagement with policy reforms. Meaningful inclusion of civil society – both on the EU level and regional levels – can create the local ownership and legitimacy the process currently lacks.

Involvement at EU level

The European Commission has long recognised the importance of civil society in enlargement.¹⁹ A decade ago, it developed the Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in Enlargement Countries 2014-2020 (EUCSG) through a consultative process involving regional stakeholders. As a result, an enabling environment for civil society became a benchmark for progress. Likewise, the inclusion of candidate-country CSOs in flagship initiatives such as the Annual Rule of Law Reports since 2024 marks a positive step towards institutionalised participation.

Civil society gained even greater prominence in the 2020 revised enlargement methodology, which pledged to “increase the use of third-party indicators”²⁰ in assessing candidates’ progress. Consultations have become more regular since then, in an effort to improve the screening of accession criteria.

Yet, despite these advances in consultations, the Commission’s approach to monitoring progress through annual country reports remains largely unchanged. The absence of transparency and a clear methodology makes it difficult to assess the extent to which CSO input is

reflected in final assessments. Limited feedback to participating organisations further weakens both the credibility and impact of these consultations.²¹

Furthermore, the Commission’s engagement with CSOs from EU aspirants remains overly concentrated in DG ENEST (formerly DG NEAR), narrowing channels of interaction and institutional networking capacities. In the absence of formal participation mechanisms, networks and personal contacts often serve as the only route to influence.²² This approach is particularly disadvantageous for under-resourced organisations in candidate countries lacking access, capacity or Brussels know-how.

To enhance the latter, the European Economic Social Committee (EESC) launched the Enlargement Candidate Members (ECM) initiative in 2023 integrating 147 CSO representatives from all candidate countries and Kosovo (as an observer) into its advisory work. This initiative allows for direct participation and representation in EU policy debates. Although only funded until 2027, this initiative provides a positive example of civil society inclusion in the EU’s consultative mechanism.

Involvement on national and regional level

At the national level, the EU has launched several targeted capacity building initiatives to strengthen civil society engagement in enlargement. Projects such as the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum²³ and the EU Technical Assistance to Civil Society Organisations in the Western Balkans and Turkey (TASCO) aim to help CSOs take part more actively in democratic processes across the region through capacity building activities, training and advisory support.²⁴

Still, CSOs have consistently raised concerns²⁵ that their participation in policy reforms remains superficial – more a “box-ticking” exercise than a genuine effort to incorporate critical voices and substantive feedback into policymaking. Across the Western Balkans, NGO participation often remains unstructured or, where formal mechanisms exist, largely procedural and consultative, with repeated appointments of government-aligned organizations raising concerns about favouritism and GONGO presence.²⁶ The TACSO Monitor on the

CSOs have consistently raised concerns that their participation in policy reforms remains superficial – more a “box-ticking” exercise than a genuine effort to incorporate critical voices and substantive feedback into policymaking.

implementation of the EU Civil Society Guidelines highlights this problem, reporting a negative trend in the Western Balkans in 2024.²⁷ Only 19% of CSOs surveyed reported effective consultation on laws and policies – the lowest figure since TASCO was established.²⁸

In Moldova, civil society participation remains limited, ad hoc and uneven, with limited access to decision-making and low public trust in CSOs, partially fuelled by pro-Russian narratives.²⁹ Ukrainian CSOs face additional constraints due to war, funding gaps and limited public data. Civil society participation in these countries continues to depend largely on EU enlargement and neighbourhood frameworks. It remains largely top-down, unstructured and underfunded – especially after cuts in US financial support.³⁰

By contrast, Montenegro offers a good-practice example. NGOs sit on the Rule of Law Council, the Growth Plan Board, and all negotiating working groups, improving reform credibility, transparency and societal ownership of Montenegro’s EU path.³¹ In addition, EU-funded initiatives such as monitoring projects on public administration reform are promising developments, having provided in-depth insights that could feed substantially into the EU’s screening process.

Scaling such models across the Western Balkans and beyond could mitigate existing gaps and create more meaningful screening for and participation in the enlargement process.

Such good-practice examples demonstrate that structured and transparent participation is possible and beneficial. Scaling such models across the Western Balkans and beyond could mitigate existing gaps and create more meaningful screening for and participation in the enlargement process.

A lack of financial support

Inclusion goes beyond institutionalised processes. It depends heavily on financial resources that enable CSOs to actively participate, build capacity and monitor reforms effectively. A range of funding instruments currently provide such support to CSOs in aspiring candidates and candidate countries.

The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) is currently the EU’s primary financing framework for support, alongside the Growth Plan for the Western

Balkans.³² Within this framework, the Civil Society Facility (CSF) established in 2008 marked the first step towards structured funding for CSOs. This is complemented by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), which provides thematic support globally, including to accession candidates.

CSOs in the Eastern Trio benefit from a mix of EU instruments, including the CSF,³³ EIDHR grants and country-specific allocations.³⁴ However, most of these programmes provide ad-hoc, short-term project grants and training, leaving gaps in operational and multi-year financing. Political volatility – particularly in Georgia and under martial law in Ukraine – further constrain CSO access to government-linked funds. The halt of USAID support has exacerbated these pressures, forcing some Georgian CSOs to cease operations entirely.³⁵

Operational support, the loss of major donors, national budget cuts and limited transparency have left many organisations under-resourced and vulnerable.

Amid growing attacks on CSOs and a shrinking of civic space in Europe,³⁶ the sector remains dependent on EU and transnational funding. While the CSF provides project-based funding and essential operational support, the loss of major donors, national budget cuts and limited transparency³⁷ have left many organisations under-resourced and vulnerable. Despite the variety of instruments – and considering that the sector and its local financial structures are still developing in the region – civil society funding in aspiring EU members remains insufficient to match the scale of the challenges.

This situation may even deteriorate in the future. In the Commission’s proposal for the 2028–2035 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF),³⁸ the IPA programme vanishes entirely. Democracy support in the EU’s neighbourhood is merged into regional clusters under the Global Europe Programme, with no funds earmarked for civil society or democracy promotion. This lack of clarity and commitment risks sidelining civic actors after 2027, possibly weakening democratic resilience and putting enlargement at risk.

PROSPECTS: WHY THE EU MUST THINK ENLARGED

The civil societies of enlargement candidates suffer from a lack of systematic involvement and predictable financial support. As a result, CSOs are often insufficiently equipped to contribute meaningfully to the enlargement process in a way that could mitigate the lack of trust in the process. The disconnect between rhetoric and reality undermines the credibility of enlargement.

The EU must therefore think enlarged: involving political actors and, crucially, civil society from aspiring EU members in shaping policy priorities and debating the Union’s future. Such inclusion can sustain reform momentum and re-establish trust amid geopolitical urgency.

However, this requires treating civil society not as an afterthought but as an integral partner in shaping Europe’s next phase. ‘Thinking enlarged’ calls for open access, institutionalised dialogue, sustainable participation, predictable financial support and a long-term roadmap for citizen participation.

- **Opening access:** The EU should connect candidate-country CSOs with officials and institutions beyond DG ENEST. Involving them directly in the work of other Directorates-General would boost the quality of policymaking and prepare candidate societies for the responsibilities of membership. Borderless and transnational policy files, such as climate change and the European Democracy Shield, are natural entry points and a valuable step in increasing adaptability and supporting the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*. The Commission’s forthcoming Civil Society Strategy should recognise established CSOs from aspiring EU member as bridges, transmitting expertise and facilitating mutual learning between administrations and civic networks. This can be a starting point to involving candidate CSOs more deeply in EU debates.³⁹

The inclusion of civil society from enlargement candidates can sustain reform momentum and re-establish trust amid geopolitical urgency.

- **Institutionalising dialogue:** The Commission’s Country Reports and Council conclusions should systematically reference CSO input. The EU should develop standardised and transparent methodologies to incorporate CSO monitoring results and provide structured feedback on how it informs assessments. Embedding this practice in the accession process would ensure civil-society participation becomes a permanent feature rather than an ad-hoc exercise.
- **Sustainable participation:** Beyond Country Reports, CSOs should have regular and structured opportunities to directly engage with EU institutions. The ECM is a promising precedent, but it must be extended beyond 2027 and replicated in other EU bodies. Regular civil-society forums co-organised with EU institutions could ensure that candidate input informs debates on enlargement, reform and long-term planning.
- **Systematic participation:** The Commission should require the structural inclusion of civil society in each candidate’s accession framework. The EU should encourage models of systematic participation, such as those pioneered in Montenegro, to be replicated across the region and the Eastern Trio, while ensuring that participation goes beyond procedural consultation and allows for meaningful influence on decision-making.
- **Predictable financial support:** The next MFF should earmark a fixed share of its enlargement

budget for CSOs. Dispersing resources across broad envelopes, as proposed under Global Europe 2028–2034 programme or the Ukrainian Facility, risks sidelining civic actors. Priority should go to grassroots organisations to prevent a concentration of resources among a few large NGOs. Financial support should not flow exclusively through central governments but be channelled directly to civil society, local administrations, independent media and SMEs, ensuring that enlargement visibly benefits societies.

- **Citizens’ Participation Roadmap:** To strengthen citizens’ direct participation, the EU should elaborate a Citizens’ Participation Roadmap that includes participants from candidate countries.⁴⁰ Mechanisms such as a European Citizens’ Reform Panel or a European Forum on Enlargement bringing together representatives from member states and candidates would help embed enlargement within a broader democratic conversation. Including citizens from aspiring members would help counter perceptions of closed-door deals among elites, boost public trust and legitimise both enlargement and parallel EU reforms.

Together, these measures would empower citizens and civil society in aspiring EU members to hold governments accountable, strengthening democratic legitimacy across Europe. By creating an inclusive process and debating key strategic planning with aspirants, “thinking enlarged” would also prepare the Union for the realities of EU30+.

DISCLAIMER

The support the European Policy Centre receives for its ongoing operations, or specifically for its publications, does not constitute an endorsement of their contents, which reflect the views of the authors only. Supporters and partners cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

Connecting Europe is a project at the European Policy Centre funded by [Stiftung Mercator](#). Its objective is twofold: To connect civil society organisations with EU decision-makers and to transnationalise EU policy debates. Established in 2017, Connecting Europe has grown into a network of 65+ organisations, which includes a broad range of research institutes, NGOs, think tanks, network projects and fellowship programmes working across Europe.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Johannes Greubel is Senior Policy Analyst, Head of Programme and ‘Connecting Europe’ Project Lead at the EPC.



Liza Saris is Policy Analyst and Project Manager at the EPC.



Vanna Curin is Programme Assistant at the EPC.



Constanze Sendler is a former Programme Assistant at the EPC.

- ¹ Brusis, Martin and Janis A. Emmanouilidis (2002), *Thinking Enlarged. The Accession Countries and the Future of the European Union*. Bonn: Europa Union Verlag.
- ² Borges de Castro, Ricardo et al. (2021), [Europe in the age of permacrisis](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ³ von der Leyen, Ursula (2024), [Keynote speech at the Bled Strategic Forum](#), Bled: Strategic Forum, 2 September 2024.
- ⁴ Costa, António (2025), [Speech by President António Costa at the European Policy Centre](#) (25 March 2025), Brussels: European Council.
- ⁵ European Council (2024), *European Council Conclusions* (27 June 2024), Brussels, EUCO 15/24.
- ⁶ European Commission (2025), [“Attitudes towards EU Enlargement”](#), *Eurobarometer*, Brussels.
- ⁷ Zorić, Bojana (2025), [EU Enlargement and Integration: Voices of support and scepticism](#), Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies.
- ⁸ Regional Cooperation Council (2024), [“Balkan Barometer 2024: Public Opinion”](#)(01 October 2025).
- ⁹ Stratulat, Corina (2023), [From rhetoric to action on enlargement: A three-pronged way forward](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ¹⁰ See for example, von der Leyen, Ursula (2023), [“2023 State of the Union Address”](#), European Parliament (10 September 2023).
- ¹¹ European Parliament (2024), [Hearing of Marta Kos, Commissioner-designate](#), Brussels.
- ¹² European Commission (2024), [Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews](#), Brussels (COM(2024) 146 final).
- ¹³ Emmanouilidis, Janis et al. (2025), [“A Test of Times: Permachange through Enlargement and EU Reform”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ¹⁴ Stratulat, Corina (2025), [“Brussels’s “Plan B” on Ukraine hides a deeper problem: Europe’s lack of will”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ¹⁵ Regional Cooperation Council (2024), *op. cit.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Zorić (2025), *op. cit.*, p. 2.
- ¹⁹ For example in the European Commission (2007), [Communication on the Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges, 2007-2010](#), (COM (2007) 663), Brussels.
- ²⁰ Mihajlović, Milena and Subotić, Strahinja (2023), [“Monitoring reforms in the EU accession process: A Western Balkan civil society contribution”](#), Belgrade: European Policy Centre, p.1.
- ²¹ Mihajlović, Subotić (2023), *op.cit.*
- ²² Dell’Aquila, Marta, et al. (2025), [Mapping Civil dialogue practices in the EU institutions](#), Brussels: European Economic and Social Committee.
- ²³ Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum (2025), [“What we do”](#) (21 October 2025).
- ²⁴ DG ENEST (2025), [Guidelines for EU support to Civil society in the Enlargement Region: 2024 Assessment](#), TACSO, Belgrade.
- ²⁵ Pociumban, Anastasia (2025), [“Advancing democratisation in the Eastern Partnership countries: the role of civil society in national reforms and European integration”](#), Brussels: Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum; The Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje (IDSCS) (2025), [“Submission to the call for Evidence for the EU Civil Society Strategy”](#), Skopje.
- ²⁶ See: Bosilkova-Antovska, Anja & Mladenovska, Simona (2025), [Monitoring Matrix on Enabling Environment for Civil Society Development: Regional Report – Western Balkans and Türkiye 2024](#), Skopje: Balkan Civil Society Development Network.
- ²⁷ DG ENEST (2025), *op. cit.*
- ²⁸ DG ENEST (2025), *op. cit.*, p. 7.
- ²⁹ Around 20%; Pociumban (2025), *op.cit.*
- ³⁰ Pociumban (2025), *op. cit.*
- ³¹ See Rule of Law Council (2025), [“Strengthening Cooperation to Improve Conditions in the Judiciary”](#) (10 October 2025). This was confirmed by CSOs as a good practice of structured civic participation in the accession process during our meetings and exchanges.
- ³² European Commission (2023), *Communication on a New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*, Brussels, (COM(2023) 691 final).
- ³³ Not limited to candidate countries.
- ³⁴ These include programmes such as [EU4Moldova](#), [Ukraine 2 EU](#) or [Pillar III of the Ukraine Facility](#).
- ³⁵ Pociumban (2025), *op. cit.*
- ³⁶ European Civic Forum (2025), [“Civic Space report 2025”](#), Brussels.; Saris, Liza (2025), [“Securing Europe’s civic space: Investing in democracy in the next MFF”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.; Saris, Liza (2025), [“Guarding the foundations: EU civil society in a changing geopolitical landscape”](#), Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- ³⁷ Only 14% of CSOs perceiving the funding process as fair and transparent. See: DG ENEST (2025), *op. cit.*
- ³⁸ European Commission (2025), [A dynamic budget for the priorities of the future – the Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2034](#), Brussels, (SWD(2025)570 final).
- ³⁹ IDSCS (2025), *op.cit.*
- ⁴⁰ Emmanouilidis et al. (2025), *op. cit.*, pp. 63–64.