

# The Impact of Conflicts in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood on the European Union's Enlargement Policy

Conflicts in the European Union's neighbourhood have a major impact on the response to integration and enlargement of the EU institutions and Member States. In the first decade since the first Hungarian Presidency in 2011, increasingly complex and unpredictable security challenges have emerged at the borders, including migration and hybrid warfare, negatively affecting the admission of new members to the European Union. The continent needs to provide the candidate countries of the Western Balkans with a new European perspective, accelerating and deepening political, economic and institutional relations with the neighbouring region. The European institutional system needs to be ready for a 30+ membership, in which the 2024 Hungarian Presidency can play a major role. The credibility of the enlargement policy, which can also be considered a domestic priority, complemented by a new methodology, could create new opportunities for economic and political unification of the Western Balkan region. Hungary has been an advocate of the European perspective of the candidate countries already during the 2011 EU Presidency, however, in the last decade enlargement fatigue has become more visible. Nevertheless, the new enlargement methodology could lead to new members by the end of the decade, for which the European Union should be prepared. Ultimately, during the 2024 Presidency Hungary must take forward the European perspective, thus contributing to the security of the EU and the European continent.

## Introduction

There are many theories that define the European Union as a *sui generis* entity, i.e. it has the characteristics of a state and an international organisation but cannot be defined by one or the other. Nonetheless, one of the most tangible signs of EU membership, alongside the Euro, are the four fundamental freedoms, which define additional rights and obligations for Member States and their citizens. The stagnation experienced by the current 27-member European Union, after Croatia's last accession in 2013 and Brexit in 2020, have fundamentally called into question the foundations of the enlargement policy. Nevertheless, a targeted, strategic enlargement can strengthen the European Union and broaden its opportunities. But how and what has contributed to enlargement fatigue,<sup>1</sup> and what impact do conflicts on the EU's eastern border, such as the Russia–Ukraine war, have on further enlargements? This paper addresses the interplay between enlargement policy and conflicts in the neighbourhood, as well as the current internal (institutional) and external (geopolitical) changes in enlargement policy. It contextualises both the opportunities and the scope for the Hungarian 2011 and 2024 EU Presidencies.

<sup>1</sup> BERGMANN et al. 2023.

The paper will first look at the historical development of enlargement policy, and secondly focus on the role of enlargement policy in the 2011 Hungarian EU Presidency. Thirdly, it will discuss current developments, including Franco–German reform proposals, breakthroughs and challenges. Finally, the economic-social-geopolitical implications of an enlarged European Union are discussed, as well as Hungary’s current interests and the role of the Central and Eastern European region as a potential mediator.

### **Historical development of the EU’s enlargement policy**

There is general agreement that the European Union’s integration process is an important instrument of European security policy. The need for lasting peace and stability in Europe, which made the integration process and enlargement policy so important, emerged from the EU’s founding fathers after the two world wars. As mentioned in the Schuman Declaration: “Europe cannot be built at once, nor integrated merely by the establishment of a common structure. [...] What is needed is concrete implementation, but above all the creation of real solidarity.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, it was not just the subordination of coal and steel to a common supreme authority that created peace and stability in Europe, but the visions and concrete reforms during a crucial and uncertain period that led to the European Union of today, without which deeper economic integration and lasting peace between European states would not have been possible. The perception of European security is based on a broad concept of security that develops common rules and values in different (policy) areas and successfully transmits these rules and values beyond the EU’s borders. The EU defines itself as a security actor and has an impact on its wider environment. Robert Kagan<sup>3</sup> points out that Europe, with its many different national characters, has learned to achieve political goals through diplomacy and negotiation as a result of centuries of war and conflict. The Peace of Utrecht, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession, the Congress of Vienna of 1814–1815 and the League of Nations as an institutional system were occasional attempts at consolidating power, but they did not prove to be nearly as durable as the European Union in its present form.

It was only after the heavy costs (in human lives and territorial losses) that 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe was able to achieve what was first called the “European Communities” and is today the European Union. In his 1946 Zurich speech, Churchill spoke of a “European family” and a “new structure of peace, security and stability”.<sup>4</sup> While the political (peace), economic (security) and institutional (stability) objectives of enlargement policy were set out more than 70 years ago, the Copenhagen criteria, which form the basis for EU membership, were only defined after the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> European Union 2023.

<sup>3</sup> KAGAN 2003: 5.

<sup>4</sup> CHURCHILL 1946.

<sup>5</sup> European Council 1993.

The spirit of the enlargement policy draws much from the ideas of functional enlargement and institutional dialogue advocated by the founding fathers. Although enlargement policy has never been smooth and predictable from a historical perspective, the 1995 enlargement with EFTA countries and the 'big bang' enlargement of 2004 demonstrated the EU's economic attractiveness to the societies of Central and Eastern Europe and made peace on the continent almost unquestionable. EU–Russia relations also reached a high point during this period, with the 1999 Moscow Summit Joint Declaration on the EU–Russia 'partnership' and the call for a 'common approach' to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century on the European continent. Nevertheless, at the same time, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, created as a counterpoint to the Warsaw Pact, opened its doors to the East European Member States, which were undergoing the legal, institutional and political reforms established by the EU, and which, in its Cold War spirit, was at odds with the EU as an economic peace project. Europe, dependent on Russian energy resources, wanted both peace and security, but enlargement policy could not keep pace with the changed geopolitical situation after the Cold War.

From the very beginning, the EU's enlargement policy has had to cope with internal and external challenges. On the one hand, the increase in the number of Member States (27) has necessitated a reform of both the institutional system and decision-making, which was sanctioned by the Lisbon Treaty of 2009. On the other hand, the expansion of NATO's eastern flank has made Russia much more critical of the enlargement policy's objectives than the EU had thought.<sup>6</sup> The enlargement process has posed serious internal capacity problems for the EU as well since the first wave of enlargement in 1973,<sup>7</sup> raising the question of whether the EU can absorb new members in a given period without jeopardising the political and policy objectives set out in the Treaties, such as economic integration, customs and monetary union and a common trade policy. As the Member States and regions have experienced very different economic development, a number of different conflicts of interest have emerged following the enlargements. The European Commission is trying to counter this with new financial and policy instruments, with varying degrees of success. The economic crisis of 2008 and then of 2012 brought to the surface the divisions between old and new Europe and between northern and southern Member States. Cohesion policy is the European Union's most successful instrument for levelling out the economic disparities caused by enlargement. While in 2003 Hungary achieved 60% of GDP per capita,<sup>8</sup> by 2022 this will have risen to more than 77%.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, enlargement not only brings economic prosperity, but also internal and external security for Member States, where law enforcement authorities can cooperate in a coordinated way thanks to the Schengen Information System and the Visa Information System (VIS). Enlargement is ultimately not only a symbolic way into Europe, but also guarantees the security of European citizens. A key priority of the 2011 Hungarian

<sup>6</sup> GIDADHUBLI 2004: 1885–1887.

<sup>7</sup> EMERSON et al. 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Eurostat 2023a.

Presidency was the preparation of Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013. One of the priorities of the 2024 Hungarian Presidency will be the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the Schengen area, which would reduce cross-border security risks and visa administration at a total of 12 border crossing points.<sup>10</sup>

### **Enlargement policy priorities of the 2011 Hungarian Presidency: Achievements**

When Hungary took over the EU Presidency in 2011, the global economy was in crisis mode. The 2008 global banking and financial meltdown, followed by the 2012 European sovereign debt crisis, limited the scope for enlargement policy. For example, easier business establishment, job creation and access to more EU resources (Cohesion Fund, Common Agricultural Policy). This potential was taken over by economic crisis management and the prevention of bank failures. In Western European countries, there was increased caution and suspicion about helping the less developed countries of Central and Southern Europe. The Hungarian Presidency's motto at the time, *A Stronger Europe*, was based on strengthening cohesion and solidarity as an antidote. The Hungarian Presidency treated the conclusion of Croatia's accession negotiations as a major achievement in the first half of 2011, with a focus on promoting the integration perspective of the Western Balkans.<sup>11</sup>

Building on the great wave of enlargement in 2004, the Hungarian Presidency has sought to maintain the momentum of the enlargement process, with the aim of building consensus among the Member States needed to move the accession process forward. The Presidency was shaped by the Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force in 2009 and fundamentally overhauled the EU's decision-making and institutional system. One of its main tasks was the "launch" of the European External Action Service, which the EU hoped would accelerate the enlargement process in the Western Balkans through diplomatic means. The enhanced political guidance role of the European Council of Heads of State and Government has been decisive, and the six-monthly rotating presidency provides an opportunity to reinforce the current strategic direction in a coordinated way. The first Hungarian EU presidency saw the accession of its southern candidates and the conclusion of negotiations with Croatia as a matter of prestige. The conclusion of the latter process within six months (with 7 open accession chapters) showed that new EU members can also deliver significant results. In addition to the Western Balkan Forum held in June 2011 and high-level visits to the region, the success of Croatia's accession has been a stimulus. The Hungarian Presidency and the Spanish–Belgian–Hungarian Presidency trio have had to work during one of Europe's most challenging times, affected by the Arab Spring and the resulting wave of migration. It has been no small task to simultaneously strengthen and coordinate the internal and external dimensions of security.

<sup>10</sup> Hungarian Police 2023.

<sup>11</sup> Government of Hungary 2010.

The economic crisis, the institutional transformation of the EU, and the political instability in the EU's neighbourhood have shown that without internal stability and cohesion, a coordinated foreign policy is not possible. In her 2010 speech "The EU and the Western Balkans in a Changing World", Catherine Ashton, then EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, referred to the EU's enlargement goal of working with a region that has suffered much in history. The EU first established its police mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2004, then in Kosovo in 2008, extending its foreign policy advisory and monitoring role to Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014).<sup>12</sup> The Presidency therefore has a dual role. It must not only act as an "honest broker", providing strategic guidance to Member States and EU institutions, but also respond to crises affecting the EU, which is challenging for any country holding the rotating presidency.

One such crisis was the Russian–Georgian war that erupted in 2008, threatening regional stability in the EU's neighbourhood, where Russia used military force, not seen since the Cold War, as a legitimate means to achieve its foreign policy goals, nominally to control territory over South Ossetia. The conflict dates back to the early 1990s, when South Ossetian separatists wanted to unite with Russia's Abkhazia (North Ossetia). Although the breakaway region is not recognised as an independent state by EU countries outside Russia, the spillover effects of the conflict from 2014 to Ukraine are still felt in Europe today. But what are the challenges facing the enlargement of the European Union and what strategies have been developed to help stabilise the neighbourhood?

The chapters of the Croatian accession negotiations concluded and finalised under the 2011 Hungarian Presidency proved to be a major success, with seven chapters closed in almost six months, almost doubling the number of EU Member States in just ten years. It has given the candidate countries of the Western Balkans hope for a settlement of their political relations and has further strengthened the EU's internal security with the country's accession to Schengen in 2023. Nevertheless, enlargement fatigue and Russia's war in February 2022 have posed unprecedented challenges for EU Member States. It has proved challenging to talk about EU enlargement alongside the war in Ukraine, anticipating membership for a war-torn country while the Western Balkan countries, which have been pursuing serious reforms since the 2010s, feel they would be sidelined. One of the biggest questions for enlargement policy is how to sustain the process in the face of a series of crises. What external and internal challenges does enlargement policy have to overcome and what impact does the war in Ukraine have on the accession process of candidate countries?

### **Enlargement policy opportunities and challenges: The Commission's enlargement package**

Enlargement policy was given a new impetus in 2020, when the European Commission presented its proposals for a "more credible, dynamic and predictable" enlargement

<sup>12</sup> European External Action Service 2021.

policy.<sup>13</sup> It expects the package of proposals to deliver faster, more sensible and tailor-made reforms from candidate countries, with better monitoring of political and institutional reforms. The Western Balkan countries are mainly feeling the after-effects of the trauma of the Yugoslav war. In addition, there are continuing difficulties in maintaining good neighbourly relations. In this respect, the Prespa Agreement was a major step forward, with Macedonia changing its name to North Macedonia in the shadow of the Bulgarian veto. Nevertheless, the Belgrade–Pristina dialogue, which is the key issue in relations between Serbia and Kosovo, is still unresolved, as relations between the two countries have not yet been settled in a satisfactory way,<sup>14</sup> and could become an acute situation during the Hungarian Presidency, as the Hungarian KFOR mission has had to respond to several armed attacks. The political and ethnic tensions between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo are having a negative impact not only on the accession of the two countries but also on the accession of other countries in the region.

Progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>15</sup> has been mixed, with the EU–BiH Stabilisation and Association Council formulating joint proposals – in line with the Dayton Peace Agreement – for the implementation of constitutional and electoral reforms, in which it must effectively involve the civil sector and citizens. Nevertheless, in last year's country report,<sup>16</sup> the Commission highlighted institutional tensions between the Republika Srpska and the majority government. Parliamentary parties have been unable to agree on constitutional and electoral reforms to bring the constitution into line with the European Convention on Human Rights, despite intensive EU assistance in negotiations. Amendments to improve the quality of electoral law were rejected by parliament. Several Constitutional Court decisions have not been fully implemented and the Council of Ministers has not taken steps to develop a national program for the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*.<sup>17</sup> A similar stalemate exists in Montenegro that draws attention to the lack of dialogue between the ruling majority and the opposition parties, and the poor functioning of institutions (in particular the Constitutional Court). The level of corruption is also a serious problem, as is the failure to tackle organised crime.

Candidate countries face external challenges in addition to internal political conditions and institutional shortcomings. Migration caused by wars and famine has put extreme security pressures on the external borders of the countries, which has also negatively affected the EU's Schengen border. According to the EU's border agency Frontex, the Western Balkans is the second main route for migrants, increasing from 27,000 in 2020 to 61,000 in 2021, and doubling to 145,000 in 2022.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the European Union cannot agree on a balance between basic humanitarian assistance and the obligation to physically and legally protect external borders. To make matters worse, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has brought a new element of insecurity and uncertainty to

<sup>13</sup> European Commission 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Council of the European Union 2023a.

<sup>15</sup> European Commission 2023.

<sup>16</sup> European Commission 2023.

<sup>17</sup> European Commission 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Frontex 2022.



European enlargement policy that the EU has not previously experienced. Not only are countries looking at the future of 21<sup>st</sup> century warfare, but also at a new era of hybrid European warfare and unknown threats. The lack of grain supplies from Ukraine has triggered a very serious famine, and thus a more serious wave of migration to Europe, in a self-perpetuating cycle. Belarus was the first to use migration as a form of hybrid warfare and disinformation against Poland and the Baltic States. The Belarusian President said that he would not prevent the influx of migrants into Lithuania, in connection with which the Belarusian authorities offered visas to those who 'continue' to Europe. This destabilisation of the Polish–Lithuanian border has also shown the insecurity of the Schengen external borders and the EU's late reaction.

To ensure border control, the European Union plans to increase the number of staff at the Frontex border agency to more than 10,000 by 2027. In an enlarged EU of more than 30 members, new approaches are needed to guarantee border protection and internal security. It is in Hungary's vital interest that its borders are internal and not external Schengen borders. This is not only a financial issue, but also a human resources issue, so Serbia's accession coincides with Hungary's enlargement interests. A key issue for accelerating membership will be the settlement of relations with Pristina, so the trio presidencies should devote special resources to promote peaceful coexistence and the restoration of good neighbourly relations. Of course, it is not only on Europe's southern periphery that enlargement policy faces challenges, but also on the frontline of the Russian–Ukrainian war in the east.

An armed invasion unprecedented since the Second World War caught the continent and the world by surprise. Nevertheless, there were warning signs, such as the Russian political leadership's idea that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical disaster of the last century",<sup>19</sup> the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the increased presence of the Wagner Group on the African continent. As Russia is one of Africa's biggest grain exporters, alongside arms, the invasion has hit the continent's grain imports extremely hard, increasing hunger and migration towards Europe.

The European Commission's latest enlargement package for 2023 is ambitious in its assessment of the progress made so far by the Western Balkan candidate countries. In particular for Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it would grant the country candidate status in recognition of its fight against organised crime, money laundering and terrorism.<sup>20</sup> On enlargement, Ursula von der Leyen spoke of not only economic but also geopolitical benefits, which are mutually reinforcing as investors, companies and workers seek stable, predictable institutions and economic opportunities.<sup>21</sup>

Although the European Commission granted candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in February 2022 as a symbolic gesture, this did not help to resolve the relationship with Russia, as Europe's economy was heavily dependent on energy from

<sup>19</sup> PUTIN 2005.

<sup>20</sup> European Commission 2023.

<sup>21</sup> European Commission 2023.

the East, which in turn was significantly reduced from 55% to 13%.<sup>22</sup> The European Union made a strategic mistake in not building up, in parallel with its enlargement policy, adequate security guarantees with Russia, which the periods of easing in East–West relations, whether in the Gorbachev era or in the early 2000s, would have provided. The fundamental lack of coordination and the diverging objectives of the NATO and EU membership process (transatlantic military/defence alliance vs. European economic peace project) may also give rise to ambiguity about Europe’s global role. More than a year of military offensive has concentrated Europe’s defence resources on the eastern front, with apparently less attention on the situation in the Western Balkans, which is politically fragile and also fragile from a security perspective. Hungary and its Central and Eastern European neighbours, on the EU’s external border, face unprecedented challenges in terms of war and its consequences. And slowly, enlargement fatigue may be replaced by a sense of war fatigue among European states.

Enlargement policy is also hampered by three sets of challenges: internal, intermediate and external. The internal challenge is the lack of EU coordination and the often divergent foreign and security policy interests of the Member States. To overcome this, there must be a frank and open debate in the European Council, where the Heads of State and Government must act as one in the interests of the EU’s development and competitiveness. This permanent process can only be achieved through EU institutional and political coordination. The second, intermediate challenge takes into account the difficulties of the candidate countries, as often the lack of institutional reforms and the limited integration experience slow down the process of moving closer to the EU. Here, Member States need to proactively assist candidate countries with experts, institutional knowledge and integration experience. Considerable cooperation could be developed between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans because of the exchange of experience and geographical and economic proximity. The forthcoming Hungarian presidency also provides a good opportunity for this. The third, external challenge is the gradual increase of the geopolitical influence of the great powers in the region by economic, political and military means. Serbia is the most exposed country in geopolitical terms, as it is trying to balance the interests of the EU and Russia. Although the country has condemned the invasion of Ukraine in a UN resolution, it has not joined the sanctions regime.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the many difficult challenges, enlargement policy can still be an attractive alternative for candidate countries. The common market and cohesion policy, together with the four freedoms, are the EU’s greatest achievements. Internal trade without EU borders offers businesses significant advantages, which can boost their competitiveness even at the regional level. Common internal security and law enforcement also enhance the security of EU citizens by complementing external border controls. According to the Spring 2023 Eurobarometer, three quarters of EU citizens support the idea of EU Member

<sup>22</sup> Eurostat 2023b.

<sup>23</sup> McBRIDE 2023.



States having a common defence policy.<sup>24</sup> However, an enlarged European Union of more than 30 members will have a new perspective not only in defence policy but also in economic and social terms, which it can use to its own advantage.

### **The impact of enlargement policy on economic and social development**

The success of the cohesion policy has helped raise living standards in the countries that joined in 2004, where the development rate has risen from 59% to more than 77%.<sup>25</sup> The following section looks at the positive social and economic impacts of the integration of the Western Balkan Six, which could also provide a guideline for the 2024 Hungarian Presidency. All six Western Balkan countries have signed the seven-year (2021–2027) Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation with the European Union, which provides the possibility to draw on direct EU funds for research and development programmes in universities and SMEs. Complemented by the Erasmus+ programme, researchers, students and companies will be part of the European innovation circuit, stimulating quality growth. This is of particular importance for the green and digital transition, where the region has outstanding potential. In line with the EU's strategic goals, infrastructure investments from the Baltic to the Aegean, such as the Via Carpathia north–south transport corridor, have started. Of key importance, the construction of Via Carpathia 2 will also link road and rail corridors with Central Europe.

The World Bank sees a positive economic outlook for the region in the medium term, but to sustain this, green energy investments need to be accelerated and energy efficiency increased.<sup>26</sup> To counterbalance the competing Sino–Russian and U.S. investment strategies, the EU needs to do more to support European investment in the region. Although the region has great potential for renewable energy production, according to the International Energy Agency's 2020 figures, the Western Balkans will rely predominantly on lignite and oil for their energy supply.<sup>27</sup> The six Western Balkan countries committed to the Western Balkans Green Agenda at the November 2020 summit in Sofia. The agenda includes decarbonisation and climate change mitigation, but it is not clear how effectively it can be implemented. According to the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik,<sup>28</sup> solar and wind energy could be a strategic investment area, replacing Russian and Chinese investments. In the long term, strategic dependencies can be reduced, but the transition will also require an expansion of transmission and distribution grid capacity, especially for decentralised solar.

The possibilities inherent in the enlargement policy, such as the green transition and digital, infrastructural developments must also be made easy to communicate to societies. Public awareness of EU developments can increase trust in the EU institutional system

<sup>24</sup> Eurobarometer 2023

<sup>25</sup> NAVRACSICS 2023.

<sup>26</sup> World Bank 2023.

<sup>27</sup> VULOVIĆ 2023.

<sup>28</sup> VULOVIĆ 2023.

and thus in the enlargement policy. A series of dedicated development policy events regarding the Western Balkans provides a good opportunity for the next Hungarian Presidency. The Hungarian-founded Western Balkan Green Center is an important step towards the regional strengthening of energy investments by domestic enterprises. Programs are being implemented, such as the building of climate resilience, which was realised with the cooperation of North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, or the creation of EU legal harmonisation in the field of climate and nature protection.<sup>29</sup>

The European Central Bank's facilitated loan programs, which provide financial support for land, air and water transport projects and urban development, also have a positive effect on the expansion. The ECB also supports projects that help provide technical assistance for better investment, address gaps in social and economic infrastructure, and encourage private sector-led growth and job creation. Local investments aimed at improving living conditions and modernising infrastructure in water supply, wastewater and waste management are at the heart of the ECB's current activities in the region.

It is shown that the countries of the region have developed and have development potential in many areas, where geopolitics very seriously determines the operational framework. The countries' recovery from their common and tragic history is the first step in a long process. Hungary and the other Central and Eastern European Member States can provide good examples of regional and cross border cooperation and common thinking in order to achieve regional security and defence. The next concluding section examines Hungary's interests inherent in the enlargement policy and the future of the enlargement policy.

### **Hungary's interests in the future development of the enlargement of the European Union**

The South Slavic war ended three years before Hungary joined the European Union, which claimed the lives of more than 100,000 people and left nearly 4 million people stateless.<sup>30</sup> The ongoing war in Ukraine makes the tragedies of that time even more vivid. That is why the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian war will be decisive for the future of enlargement. Will Europe inherit a frozen conflict, or will a changed Ukrainian territory be next door, bringing Russia's sphere of interest closer? Is Europe's influence increasing or decreasing during the post-war recovery period? Although Hungary's 2024 presidency priorities have not yet been published, several things can be deduced from the Strategic Agenda<sup>31</sup> adopted by the presidency trio. The trio emphasises the persistent support of the EU in addition to the humanitarian, economic and financial support for Ukraine, taking into account the collective defence interests. During the presidency, a serious

<sup>29</sup> Nyugat-Balkáni Zöld Központ 2023.

<sup>30</sup> United Nations 2023.

<sup>31</sup> Council of the European Union 2023c.

emphasis can be placed on regular political dialogue with the countries participating in the enlargement, especially in order to meet the Copenhagen criteria. Under the Hungarian Presidency, the Western Balkans Heads of State and Government Summit could take place at home, which would discuss the progress of the members closest to the 2030 entry target date. Expanding and strengthening the circle, the European Political Community must negotiate comprehensive security guarantees. From Hungary's point of view, long-term security guarantees, the European defence community and balanced power centres are necessary. With the gradual enlargement, East Central Europe can play an important role in the exchange of experience with the Western Balkan countries due to its geographical and historical proximity. If the continent is committed to lasting and long-term peace, it will be important to define the relationship between the EU, Ukraine and Russia. Despite the current war, the dialogue with Serbia and Kosovo must be continued in order to resolve the conflict. If a solution to this is found, cooperation on the Schengen border will become much easier within the framework of joint action against migration, human trafficking and organised crime.

Both older and newer member states, EU institutions and regional actors, as well as major powers are interested in the economic opportunities and political cooperation inherent in the Western Balkan region. First, the six Western Balkan countries must jointly define their regional interests, but this requires confronting the historical past and processing collective traumas, without which societies cannot move forward. The greatest potential inherent in the Western Balkan region is its social, religious and ethnic diversity, which should be seen as a resource and which can help define common goals, such as strengthening cultural relations, dialogue between religions, or even discovering the shared historical past with Central Europe. In addition, the EU must be ready to be able to involve more than 30 countries in multi-level decision-making, its institutional system and increasingly complex policies. Instead of enlargement fatigue, enlargement dynamism must take the lead, where policy sees challenges as opportunities. East Central Europe has the greatest opportunity, since with 20 years of membership behind it, it can help the development of southern candidates as a mediator of good practices.

The enlargement policy deals with many external, intermediate and internal challenges, but the most decisive decision point in relation to a candidate country is the consensus of the member states reached in the General Affairs Council based on the guidelines of the European Council, which expresses the EU's resolute political unity towards the individual EU aspirants. By 2030, some Western Balkan countries have a serious chance of joining, as Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are already negotiating the accession chapters with the EU. Regarding Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Commission recommends opening the negotiation chapters. The regional commitment to the EU can also have a positive effect for Kosovo. The situation of Georgia and Ukraine in connection with the frozen and ongoing armed conflict is extremely sensitive. The condition for joining the EU is the existence of a given country's political, institutional, economic and social stability, which is currently not a given in the case of Ukraine, not to mention the

fact that the conflict is still ongoing. And the EU would be entering legally uncharted territory if it started accession negotiations with a country on whose territory war is taking place. Evidently, the Russian–Ukrainian war also encouraged the member states of the EU to act more quickly. This is especially visible after the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, in connection with the French–German intergovernmental reform proposal of 2023 (4-speed Europe). Candidates thus have several options for participation: core Europe (full Schengen and Eurozone); EU membership (without the Eurozone); associate membership (similar to EFTA); European Political Community (the U.K. or later Russia).<sup>32</sup> In order to maintain the credibility of the enlargement policy, it can be strengthened with the six Western Balkan countries, which have been waiting for accession for several decades and are implementing reforms slowly but surely. By 2030, this would contribute to the stability of the region, the security of EU borders including Hungary’s security. The 2024 Hungarian Presidency has a serious opportunity to contribute and maintain the dynamism of the enlargement process through institutional reforms, high-level political dialogue and the sharing of good practices.

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<sup>32</sup> HANKE VELA – SORGI 2023.

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