

The Future of EU Enlargement: Integrating Ukraine and the Western Balkans While Preserving the Union's Effectiveness – A French Perspective

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From the French perspective, the future enlargement of the European Union represents both a geopolitical necessity and an institutional challenge. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and growing external influence in the Western Balkans have reinforced the strategic importance of a stronger and more resilient European Union. France should therefore support the accession of Ukraine and the Western Balkans, provided that enlargement is accompanied by institutional reforms within the EU and continued reforms in candidate countries. A gradual integration model would allow candidates to participate progressively in selected EU policies before full membership while preserving the Union's capacity to act effectively. This policy brief recommends gradual and conditional integration, institutional reform and adequate financial preparation as the foundations of France's enlargement strategy.

Primary Thesis

France should support an accelerated yet conditional accession process for Ukraine and the Western Balkans, recognising enlargement as both a geopolitical necessity and a strategic investment in European security. At the same time, France should advocate for parallel institutional reforms within the European Union and continued political, economic and judicial reforms in candidate countries to ensure that enlargement strengthens rather than weakens the Union's effectiveness.

Background and Problem Definition

From the French perspective, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has transformed the European security environment and reinforced the strategic importance of EU enlargement. At the same time, instability and growing external influence in the Western Balkans directly affect France's interest in maintaining a stable and secure European neighbourhood. Ukraine obtained EU candidate status in 2022 and has continued implementing reforms despite the ongoing war.

The European Commission has acknowledged progress in areas such as judicial reform, anti-corruption measures and public administration, while emphasising that further work remains necessary. The Western Balkan countries have also pursued EU membership for many years, although their progress has remained uneven. For France, maintaining a credible enlargement perspective is therefore important for encouraging reforms and preserving the European Union's influence in the region. France has traditionally adopted a cautious approach to enlargement, maintaining that the Union should strengthen its institutional effectiveness before admitting new members. Recent geopolitical developments, however, have contributed to an evolution of the French position. President Emmanuel Macron has increasingly presented enlargement as a strategic investment in European security, provided that accession is accompanied by institutional reforms and compliance with EU standards. France should therefore support enlargement while ensuring that it strengthens European security without undermining the Union's capacity to act effectively.

ANALYSIS

Why Enlargement Matters? From the French perspective, EU enlargement is no longer merely a political project but a strategic response to Europe's changing security environment. Russia's aggression against Ukraine and continued instability in the Western Balkans demonstrate that developments in neighbouring countries directly affect France's long-term security interests. The accession of Ukraine and the Western Balkan countries could strengthen regional stability and limit opportunities for external powers, particularly Russia and China, to expand their influence in Europe. Enlargement should therefore be regarded as a long-term investment in European security and geopolitical resilience. At the same time, France recognises that enlargement presents significant institutional and financial challenges. Ukraine's large agricultural sector and expected eligibility for EU funding would place additional pressure on the EU budget, while the admission of new members could make decision-making more difficult. France therefore maintains that enlargement must be accompanied by institutional and financial reforms that preserve the Union's capacity to act effectively. For France, gradual integration offers a balance between geopolitical urgency and institutional effectiveness. Candidate countries should progressively gain access to selected EU policies, programmes and the Single Market as they implement required reforms. This approach would provide tangible incentives for reform while ensuring that full membership remains conditional on meeting EU accession criteria. It would therefore allow France to support enlargement as a strategic objective without abandoning its traditional emphasis on an effective and resilient European Union.

Key Challenges

Despite its strategic importance, France recognises that EU enlargement presents three major challenges.

First, institutional decision-making could become increasingly difficult as the number of Member States grows. From the French perspective, continued reliance on unanimity, particularly in foreign and security policy, risks limiting the Union's ability to respond effectively to international crises. Preserving the EU's capacity to act after enlargement is therefore a strategic priority for France.

Second, enlargement will require significant financial adjustments. Ukraine's large agricultural sector and the economic needs of the Western Balkan countries will place additional pressure on the Common Agricultural Policy, Cohesion Policy and the EU budget. France therefore considers it essential to incorporate future enlargement into the next Multiannual Financial Framework while preserving the Union's financial sustainability.

Third, candidate countries must continue reforms in areas such as judicial independence, anticorruption policy, democratic governance and public administration. From the French perspective, geopolitical urgency should not replace measurable progress towards EU standards. Maintaining strict conditionality is therefore essential to preserving the credibility of enlargement and the Union's institutional integrity.

Policy Recommendations

1. Introduce a Gradual and Conditional Integration Model. France should advocate within the European Council for a gradual integration framework allowing candidate countries to participate progressively in selected EU policies before obtaining full membership. This could include phased access to the Single Market, participation in EU programmes and observer status in selected EU institutions. Access to these benefits should remain linked to measurable progress and compliance with the Copenhagen criteria, particularly in areas such as the rule of law, judicial independence and democratic governance. Such an approach would provide tangible incentives for reform while ensuring that geopolitical considerations do not replace objective accession requirements.

2. Reform EU Institutions to Ensure Effective Decision-Making. France should continue promoting institutional reforms that strengthen the European Union's ability to function effectively after enlargement. In particular, France should support the wider use of qualified majority voting in selected areas of foreign and security policy while respecting democratic legitimacy and the interests of both current and future Member States. A more efficient decision-making system would reduce the risk of institutional deadlock and strengthen the Union's capacity to respond effectively to geopolitical crises.

3. Prepare EU Financial Policies for Enlargement. France should advocate reforms of the Common Agricultural Policy and the next Multiannual Financial Framework while maintaining financial and technical assistance for candidate countries. According to Bruegel, Ukraine's accession under the current CAP could require approximately €85-96 billion over a seven-year budgetary period, including around €12 billion annually in direct payments. France should therefore promote reforms that preserve the Union's financial sustainability while ensuring fair support for

both existing and future Member States. Pre-accession funding should remain linked to measurable reform progress. At the same time, Ukraine's agricultural potential could contribute to strengthening European food security and strategic resilience, provided that appropriate safeguards limit distortions within the Common Agricultural Policy. France should therefore treat financial preparation for enlargement not only as a budgetary challenge but also as an element of the Union's long-term strategic autonomy.

CONCLUSION

From the French perspective, the enlargement of the European Union to include Ukraine and the Western Balkans represents one of the most important strategic decisions facing Europe in the coming years. While accession will require significant institutional, financial and political adjustments, France recognises that the long-term geopolitical, economic and security benefits outweigh the associated challenges. A credible enlargement policy would strengthen European security, promote democratic reforms and enhance the European Union's position as a global geopolitical actor. At the same time, France maintains that enlargement must not come at the expense of the European Union's effectiveness. Institutional reform, gradual integration and strict adherence to the Copenhagen criteria should remain essential conditions for future accession. Candidate countries must continue implementing political, economic and judicial reforms, while the European Union should provide clear political commitment, technical assistance and financial support throughout the accession process. France should therefore continue advocating within the European Council for an enlargement strategy that combines deeper European integration with institutional reform. By promoting a gradual, merit-based and strategically driven accession process, France can contribute to building a stronger, more resilient and more effective European Union, capable of safeguarding Europe's security, stability and prosperity in an increasingly competitive international environment.

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