



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

FOCUS EUROPE NOVEMBER 2025

Authors

Ruchira Kamboj
Arshiya Chaturvedi

Volume I, Issue 5



Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

www.delhipolicygroup.org



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power

Focus Europe

Vol. I, Issue 5

November 2025

ABOUT US

Founded in 1994, the Delhi Policy Group (DPG) is among India's oldest think tanks with its primary focus on strategic and international issues of critical national interest. DPG is a non-partisan institution and is independently funded by a non-profit Trust. Over past decades, DPG has established itself in both domestic and international circles and is widely recognised today among the top security think tanks of India and of Asia's major powers.

Since 2016, in keeping with India's increasing global profile, DPG has expanded its focus areas to include India's regional and global role and its policies in the Indo-Pacific. In a realist environment, DPG remains mindful of the need to align India's ambitions with matching strategies and capabilities, from diplomatic initiatives to security policy and military modernisation.

At a time of disruptive change in the global order, DPG aims to deliver research based, relevant, reliable and realist policy perspectives to an actively engaged public, both at home and abroad. DPG is deeply committed to the growth of India's national power and purpose, the security and prosperity of the people of India and India's contributions to the global public good. We remain firmly anchored within these foundational principles which have defined DPG since its inception.

Authors

Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj, Senior Fellow for International Security and Global Affairs, Delhi Policy Group

Arshiya Chaturvedi, Research Associate, Delhi Policy Group

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Delhi Policy Group as an Institution.

Cover Images:

Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, in discussion with António Costa, the President of the European Council, on the EU's economy before the October Euro Summit, on September 30, 2025. Source: [X/@eucopresident](#)

Kaja Kallas, the Vice-President of the European Commission and EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy at the Western Balkans Summit, in London on October 22, 2025. Source: [X/@kajakallas](#)

© 2025 by the Delhi Policy Group

Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, 1st Floor,

India Habitat Centre,

Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

www.delhipolicygroup.org

Focus Europe:

The EU's Expansion Plan

Contents

Executive Summary	1
The European Union and its Enlargement Agenda	2
The Political and Bureaucratic Procedure	3
A Mutually Reinforcing Scheme	4
The Stumbling Blocks.....	6
Conclusion.....	7

The EU's Expansion Plan

by

Ambassador Ruchira Kamboj & Arshiya Chaturvedi

Executive Summary

In an increasingly uncertain geopolitical and economic environment, nations are turning inward to build self-sufficiency and resilience. The EU, for its part, is turning to enlargement as a strategic tool to strengthen its security and expand its political influence. In a November 4, 2025 press conference¹, EU High Representative Kaja Kallas asserted that if the EU wants to become a stronger player on the world stage, enlargement is a necessity. As a strategic investment in stability, enlargement brings neighbouring states into the EU's collective framework, reducing the risks of instability or external interference in Europe's periphery and strengthening the Union's economic and political clout. The process is not without its complexities, internal and external, and herein lies an essential paradox: a process that is formally fair, merit based and rigorous is unfolding at a time when the EU's geopolitical need for power, reach and strategic depth has never been greater. Reconciling these two imperatives is the dilemma that will define this engagement round.

It is important to note that the current enlargement debate is not solely a product of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. While the war prompted the swift applications of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia in 2022², the remaining six candidates have been in the queue for years—some for decades. Türkiye applied as early as 1987, while the Western Balkan states have pursued EU membership since the early 2000s. This renewed momentum, therefore, builds not on sudden interest, but on longstanding aspirations that have now converged with Europe's geopolitical imperative for broader influence and a stable periphery.

The present brief outlines the EU's enlargement process, explores its mutually reinforcing attributes, and highlights the major challenges that may arise in its fruition, in a process that remains inherently complex.

¹ EEAS Press Team. "Enlargement: Press Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Kaja Kallas at the College Readout." European Union, November 4, 2025. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/enlargement-press-remarks-high-representativevice-president-kaja-kallas-college-readout_en.

² Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. "The European Commission Recommends to Council Confirming Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia's Perspective to Become Members of the EU and Provides Its Opinion on Granting Them Candidate Status." European Commission, June 17, 2022. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/european-commission-recommends-council-confirming-ukraine-moldova-and-georgias-perspective-become-2022-06-17_en#:~:text=Background,on%20%20and%2010%20May.

The European Union and its Enlargement Agenda

The EU was conceived as a political and economic union to bind Europe's nations together after two devastating World Wars. Its purpose was simple yet ambitious: economic recovery, national reconstruction, and the long-term preservation of peace and stability. Beginning as a six-nation economic community in 1958, the EU has grown into a union of 27 member states.³ The last accession country was Croatia in 2013, becoming the 28th member state; however, in 2016, through a referendum, the UK decided to withdraw from the EU, with the exit taking effect in January 2020, dropping the number down to 27.⁴

More recently, at a press conference⁵ on November 4, 2025, EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas noted that the EU is experiencing a rare moment as a broad enlargement window reopens. She emphasised that the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and the shifting dynamics of global power and alliances have made enlargement a political priority for the EU to assert itself as a major player on the international stage, adding that accession for new members is being targeted for 2030.

Kallas underscored three central points: that enlargement is a necessity for Europe at this geopolitical moment; that the process will remain fair, tough and strictly merit-based even as this unique window of opportunity opens; and that a larger Union will strengthen Europe's clout and influence in global affairs.

Which are the candidate countries for this latest round of enlargement? The nine under consideration include: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye and Ukraine. Kosovo⁶ has also applied, but, as it is not recognised by all EU member states, it is treated as a potential candidate rather than counted among the nine.

These candidate countries have a running score card. Kallas listed Albania, Moldova, Montenegro and Ukraine as frontrunners in the accession process. Ukraine was commended particularly for undertaking unprecedented and wide-ranging reforms, underscoring a commitment to pursue EU membership despite being at war. Moldova

³ Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood . "From 6 to 27 Members." European Commission, May 29, 2019. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/6-27-members_en.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Supra Note 1

⁶ India does not recognise Kosovo as an independent country.

Chaudhury, Dipanjan Roy. "India Dismisses All Speculation of Recognizing Kosovo Following Opening of Private Trade Office." The Economic Times. Economic Times, November 25, 2022. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/india-dismisses-all-speculation-of-recognizing-kosovo-following-opening-of-private-trade-office/articleshow/95772670.cms?from=mdr>.

was another country in the region demonstrating strong prospects for EU integration, backed by a clear electoral mandate and an active push on reforms.

However, countries like Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo had witnessed political crises stemming from policy inaction and institutional deterioration, which had made their progress for EU accession stagnant or sluggish. With respect to Georgia and Turkey, the Vice-President of the European Commission has noted that their progress in the process had been limited and, in some areas, has even regressed.

The Political and Bureaucratic Procedure

The Treaty on European Union, under Article 49, provides that any European country that embodies the core tenets of the EU is eligible for membership. Such a country will have to make an application to the European Council (EC), which will then assess whether the country meets the key requirements, commonly referred to as the Copenhagen Criteria.⁷ These criteria, which were defined and adopted by the European Council in 1993 at Copenhagen and hence the name, include stable institutions to guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities; a functioning and competitive market economy; and the capacity to assume the obligations of membership including an alignment with EU law, across political, economic, and monetary domains.

Countries in the Western Balkans or the WB6 enjoy a different and specialised scheme or approach, called the stabilization and association process (SAP). Under this scheme, those countries from the region that have made an application for accession and have become potential candidates in the process get political and economic support from the EU in terms of financial assistance, easy market access, and cooperation for reconstruction, development, and stabilization.⁸ This is aimed at improving their readiness for EU membership, as these countries have comparatively lower political, economic, and social standards than their Western European counterparts. The European Investment Bank has, since 2009, made substantial investments in the region, totalling €15.6 billion so far, under the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) to support development projects.⁹

Lately, the EU has also adopted numerous initiatives and programmes aimed at supporting the region's long-term economic recovery, green and digital transition,

⁷ Directorate-General for Communication. "EU Enlargement." European Union, n.d. https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Gordana Kovačević. "Faster Investment in the Western Balkans with Eu Backing." European Investment Bank, August 29, 2024. <https://www.eib.org/en/stories/western-balkans-investment-eu>.

regional integration and convergence with the EU. These include the Western Balkans Strategy of 2018, focused on the area of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)/Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)¹⁰, the Comprehensive Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans in 2020¹¹ and the more recent Growth Plan for the Western Balkans in 2023¹².

Once the European Council concludes that a country meets the Copenhagen Criteria and all EU member states endorse this decision, it is formally designated a candidate for EU membership. After this, the negotiation process commences, where the two sides deliberate on various critical aspects and arrangements necessary for implementing accession. These may include financial considerations such as how much the new member country will contribute to and receive from the EU budget, or any other transition-related arrangement, such as a plan to prepare the country to apply and enforce laws effectively, and carry out necessary reforms. The core purpose of this process is to help the new country, as well as the existing member countries, to adjust to the Union's enlargement. During this process, the European Commission rigorously monitors candidate countries' progression towards the adaptation of EU legislation and the fulfilment of other commitments. The findings are also regularly reported to the European Council and Parliament.

As the negotiation process culminates and agreed-upon reforms are successfully implemented by the candidate country to the satisfaction of the European Commission, an accession treaty is prepared with all requisite terms and conditions defining its Union membership. This treaty is then placed before the EU's principal organs, including the European Commission, the European Council and the European Parliament, for approval. Following successful approval, it is set to be signed and ratified by all existing EU member countries and the candidate country.¹³

A Mutually Reinforcing Scheme

The eastward expansion of the EU is not simply a political scheme of border enlargement but a strategic recalibration to strengthen the Union holistically, across political, economic, and security dimensions. Beyond the EU, the process of

¹⁰ Strategic Communications. "The EU and the Western Balkans: Towards a Common Future | EEAS Website." European Union, March 16, 2022. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-western-balkans-towards-common-future_en.

¹¹ Press Corner. "Western Balkans: An Economic and Investment Plan to Support the Economic Recovery and Convergence." European Commission, October 6, 2020. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1811.

¹² Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood. "Growth Plan for the Western Balkans." European Union, October 23, 2024. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/growth-plan-western-balkans_en.

¹³ Supra Note 7

enlargement also presents substantial advantages for the acceding countries that could potentially catalyse their political, economic, and institutional transformation.

The inclusion of new countries expands the EU's single market by bringing in additional labour, resources and consumers, thereby enlarging the Union's common economic space. Further, each of these countries also brings in its economic capacities which may complement or advance the collective interests of the Union. For instance, the inclusion of Ukraine, which is known for its strong agricultural base and also holds significant reserves of key critical minerals, could potentially bolster the EU's critical minerals supply chain. It is this potential to make the EU's common economic space more dynamic and diversified, such that it boosts intra-EU trade, investment, and competitiveness, while also fostering greater EU economic interdependence, that underscores enlargement as a compelling economic proposition.

Speaking of the economic benefits of EU enlargement for candidate countries, the most significant is easy access to the EU Single Market, one of the world's largest economic areas. This ability to export and import without tariffs or major trade barriers gives businesses from these countries millions of new consumers, leading to market expansion and higher production.

While access to a larger market is advantageous, it also exposes new member states to stronger competition that can challenge domestic industries. However, accession requires harmonising national laws, regulations and institutions with EU standards, a process that strengthens economic efficiency, transparency and stability.

Candidate countries also benefit from increased investment and financial assistance through the EU's structural and cohesion funds, which support infrastructure, innovation and job creation—directly fuelling economic growth. They may further attract foreign investment due to higher investor confidence arising from alignment with EU rules.

In addition, citizens gain wider personal and professional opportunities through the freedom to live, study and work across the EU.

Focusing on the political merits, as more and more countries become members of the EU and adopt its legal and normative standards across different domains, including democracy, human rights, rule of law, economic practices and others, the EU's core values and norms gain wider global influence. This propagation of values and principles in turn strengthens the EU's political clout and amplifies its global voice, giving it more power to influence global agendas. Candidate countries, meanwhile, stand to gain as EU membership provides strong incentives for political stability and

reform. Additionally, these countries, which may have limited influence when acting alone in international forums, gain collective bargaining power by participating through a larger bloc to negotiate collectively on trade, climate, security, and other global issues. While this collective architecture facilitates stronger global influence, it could on occasion also potentially compromise or dilute the individual stance of candidate countries.

The EU, fundamentally, is a union focused on promoting the political and economic growth of its member states, with security and defence largely being national prerogatives. Nonetheless, in recent years, responding to aggression in their neighbourhood and pressure from partner countries for greater self-reliance in defence, the EU and its member states have significantly ramped up defence spending. In 2024, the total defence expenditure of the EU member states hit €343 billion, with €106 billion of that directed to defence investment.¹⁴ Kallas reiterated this during her November 4 remarks; security was now the top agenda for everyone.

The Western Balkan states and other Eastern European countries like Ukraine and Moldova, have traditionally occupied a strategic 'grey zone,' acting as a buffer between the EU and Russia. However, these smaller countries with comparatively limited defence capabilities stand vulnerable to attack from a powerful state, as seen in Ukraine. Being in the EU's neighbourhood, their stability and security are crucial to the Union's overall stability, security and prosperity. By integrating these countries into its collective framework, the EU hopes to make them less vulnerable to pressure from larger powers and helps secure its own borders and regional stability. Thus, the EU has already started engaging in security aspects with many countries in the region, including the signing of joint security commitments with Ukraine, establishing Security and Defence Partnerships with Moldova, North Macedonia, and Albania, as well as the potential launching of a new Security and Defence Dialogue with Montenegro.¹⁵

The Stumbling Blocks

While the EU's enlargement presents critical advantages for both the Union and aspiring members, there exist certain strategic impediments to its realisation.

The 'realistic goal' that has been set for completing the current enlargement process is 2030. This timeline might appear somewhat ambitious, considering the current political and socio-economic realities of the candidate countries. Ukraine, still in a full-scale war with Russia, has witnessed extensive damage to its economy, governance

¹⁴ European Council. "EU Defence in Numbers." European Union, 2024.
<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/defence-numbers/>.

¹⁵ Supra Note 1

structures, infrastructure, and social fabric. Its recovery, to the extent that it could meet EU accession standards, will take considerable time, a point that was also underscored by French President Macron while addressing the EU Parliament in 2022. He had then noted that Ukraine could need many years, even decades, to recover and meet EU accession standards unless those standards are adjusted.¹⁶

As for other potential candidates, including the Western Balkan states, their economic, political and social indicators remain below EU averages. They have made steady progress in recent years, but still face substantial gaps they need to close before meeting full accession criteria. There may also be some wariness among existing EU member states about the possibility of hastening the accession of these countries, based on previous enlargement experiences. Many Eastern European countries, including Hungary, Poland, and Romania, after their successful accession to the EU, have witnessed a serious erosion of EU fundamentals marked by weakened judicial independence, media censorship, unilateral constitutional changes, and corruption.¹⁷ Hesitation might also arise because of the need to divert significant EU funds toward these potential members, who, as detailed above, require extensive financial and institutional support.

Other than these EU-specific impediments, there are additional challenges emerging from the larger geopolitical context. For instance, Russia, much like the EU, has these countries within its periphery, with countries like Ukraine and Georgia even sharing land borders. Any possibility of these countries joining the EU poses significant security concerns for Russia and could provoke a strong response. Moreover, any change in the EU's composition may also affect the position of its allies, particularly the US, which remains a deeply engaged partner, and could become a point of consideration for both sides as they navigate the terrain of their partnership.

Conclusion

In a world marked by uncertainty, fragmentation and intensifying competition, EU enlargement is being framed as a strategic response to safeguard collective prosperity and resilience. From the EU's perspective, it is "a political priority and a geopolitical investment," not a "nice to have" but "a necessity if we want to be a stronger player on the world stage," as Kaja Kallas has put it. By integrating and securing smaller and more vulnerable Eastern European states within the Union under the promise of

¹⁶ BBC. "Ukraine Bid to Join EU Will Take Decades Says Macron." *BBC News*, May 9, 2022, sec. Europe. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61383632>.

¹⁷ Sedelmeier, Ulrich. 2023. "Is There an East-West Divide on Democracy in the European Union? Evidence from Democratic Backsliding and Attitudes towards Rule of Law Interventions." *Journal of European Public Policy* 31 (3): 825–49. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13501763.2023.2198569>

greater economic and political stability, enlargement is expected to make the EU more cohesive, influential and secure.

Yet the process is far from straightforward. It remains complex, shaped by multiple internal and external constraints — from demanding accession procedures and the need for unanimous agreement among existing member states to shifting geopolitical realities. As Kallas herself has underlined, accession is a long-term, merit-based investment designed to strengthen the Union's political weight. The real test for this enlargement round will be whether the EU can reconcile its search for power and influence with its commitments to fairness, credibility and genuine partnership with those seeking to join.



Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, 1st Floor,
India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road
New Delhi - 110003
India

www.delhipolicygroup.org