Background Note II: EU Enlargement and the Future of Europe's Neighbourhood

Ireland's accession to the European Communities in 1973 demonstrated the transformative potential of European integration. Membership helped to support economic development, expand trade opportunities and provided a framework for prosperity and cooperation. As the EU considers future enlargement, Ireland's experience continues to illustrate how accession can benefit both new members and the European Union as a whole.

Throughout the second half of 2026, enlargement remained one of the most significant issues on the EU agenda. Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine, wider geopolitical competition and continued instability in parts of the European neighbourhood have reinforced the importance of enlargement. It is increasingly viewed not only as a process of accession for candidate countries, but also as a strategic investment in the future security, resilience and influence of the EU itself.

The accession process continues to be based on the Copenhagen Criteria, with progress remaining merit-based and dependent on performance in implementing the necessary reforms. Maintaining the credibility of this approach remains essential to ensuring that commitments, reforms and progress are recognised and rewarded.

The enlargement agenda made steady progress during 2026 with enlargement countries continuing accession-related reforms despite a challenging geopolitical environment and varying national circumstances. Enlargement continues to demonstrate its value in promoting stability, democratic reform and economic development, while reinforcing the EU’s long-term strategic interests.

Developments across both the Eastern Partnership region and the Western Balkans underscored the diversity of challenges and opportunities within the accession process. While progress has advanced at different rates, these developments have reaffirmed the importance of maintaining a fair, credible and merit-based accession framework.

The year also highlighted the broader importance of the EU’s relationships with neighbouring countries and strategic partners. Throughout the Presidency period, the EU continued to engage with neighbouring countries on issues

including energy security, trade, connectivity, climate policy and regional stability. Discussions with Canada on the possibility of associate membership also reflected the EU's wider efforts to deepen its relationships with close and like-minded partners.

The referendum held in Iceland during the Irish Presidency attracted considerable interest. While Icelandic voters chose not to resume accession negotiations, the result served as a reminder that decisions regarding EU membership ultimately rest with the citizens of each country. The EU has consistently respected such sovereign choices while remaining open to close cooperation and partnership. In the current climate, these strong partnerships remain of strategic importance regardless of accession status.

At the same time, developments in Georgia and Türkiye illustrated the complexities of enlargement and neighbourhood policy. Democratic standards, the rule of law and reform efforts continue to shape the EU's engagement with both countries and its broader approach to enlargement.

As the Irish Presidency concludes, enlargement remains one of the most significant long-term projects of the EU. The decisions taken in the coming years will shape the political, economic and security landscape of Europe.

Questions for Consideration

- How can the EU maintain momentum on enlargement while preserving a rigorous, merit-based accession process?
- What lessons can be drawn from the progress achieved by Enlargement Countries?
- How can the EU strengthen resilience and democratic governance in candidate countries facing hybrid threats and external interference?
- How can the EU prepare itself for further enlargement, and what institutional reforms, including possible Treaty reform, may be needed?
- What role should neighbourhood partnerships play alongside formal enlargement policy?
- How can national parliaments contribute to informed debate and democratic accountability in relation to enlargement?