

PAULINA: My name is Paulina Pacuła. I'm a reporter with **OKO.press**, an independent Polish news outlet, and this is the **LENS EU Podcast**.

LENS—the **Localized European News Service**—is a consortium of nine media organizations working together to bring European stories closer to local audiences in six countries.

Together, we explore our shared European present and future: what inspires hope, what raises concern, how European societies are responding to today's challenges, and how the European Union is shaping the years ahead.

Welcome to a new episode of the **LENS EU Podcast**—*zooming in on what drives Europe's community*.

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PAULINA: It has been more than twenty-two years since the European Union's biggest enlargement in 2004, when ten countries joined the bloc, and more than thirteen years since the last one in 2013, when Croatia became the EU's newest member after a decade-long accession process.

Overall, the European Union—or its predecessor, the European Economic Community and later European Community—has enlarged seven times since its establishment in 1958, meaning that a round of enlargement has taken place roughly every nine or ten years. Most of these enlargements happened under difficult or challenging circumstances and were accompanied by doubts and concerns. So, timewise, one might say, it's the highest time for the next one.

But this time hesitations are more severe and, paradoxically, have been amplified by the growing number of member states, their diverging national interests and the geopolitical pressure exerted by external actors, most notably Russia.

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PAULINA: Today, there are ten European countries officially seeking membership in the European Union, although the stage of their accession processes differs considerably.

The Western Balkan countries such as North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina has been in the process for 10 to nearly 20 years. Some of them has already managed to open all of the negotiating chapters and provisionally close some. Others has not even opened one. Along the way, the process has also been hindered by bilateral historical disputes.

The most advanced country on its EU path—Montenegro—has opened all 33 negotiating chapters and provisionally closed 18 of them, including two on the so-called “Super Tuesday” on 27 June 2026. Just a few weeks ago, the European Commission and Montenegro began drafting the Accession Treaty, bringing the country closer than ever to EU membership.

The second most advanced candidate, Albania, applied for EU membership in 2009 and opened accession negotiations only in July 2022. Since then, it has completed the screening process, opened all 33 negotiating chapters and provisionally closed three. Yet there is still a long way to go, and questions remain about the extent to which Prime Minister Edi Rama's government is genuinely committed to strengthening the rule of law, tackling corruption, ensuring transparency and accountability in public institutions, and protecting fundamental

rights, including media freedom. The recent protests over the controversial coastal development linked to Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump have only reinforced concerns about transparency, governance and the rule of law.

It has also become increasingly apparent that **Serbia**, which filed for EU membership in 2009, formally opened accession negotiations in 2014 and up until now has opened 22 out of 33 negotiating chapters provisionally closing two of them, is unwilling to meet one of the key accession requirements: alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Belgrade has pursued a largely pro-Russian foreign policy, refusing to implement EU sanctions against Russia and maintaining close ties with Moscow. So, for many in the EU, the question is whether Serbia truly wants to become a member of the Union, or whether admitting it too early would risk bringing another Russian Trojan horse into the EU—something Europe has already experienced with Hungary under Viktor Orbán's government.

North Macedonia, which applied for EU membership as early as 2004, has so far only completed the screening process. Its accession has repeatedly been delayed by bilateral disputes with neighboring countries. After resolving the long-running name dispute with Greece, which resulted in the country adding the prefix "North" to its constitutional name, Skopje faced a new obstacle from Bulgaria. Under the EU negotiating framework agreed in 2022, North Macedonia must amend its constitution to recognize the Bulgarian minority before the first negotiating cluster can be formally opened. The current government has refused to do so without guarantees that Sofia will not block the process again, leaving accession effectively stalled.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, **Kosovo** and **Georgia** all lag behind for very different reasons and have not yet opened accession negotiations. **Georgia** was granted candidate status in 2023, but its accession process has effectively stalled following democratic backsliding, with the government in Tbilisi announcing that it would suspend work toward EU membership until the end of 2028 while adopting legislation widely criticized by Brussels as incompatible with European democratic standards.

Because five EU member states still do not recognize **Kosovo's** independence, the country has not been granted candidate status. Instead, to keep its European perspective alive and maintain political and public support for integration, the EU has designated Kosovo a potential candidate—a category for countries that do not yet meet the formal conditions for candidate status but are considered to have a credible European future.

Bosnia and Herzegovina obtained candidate status in 2022 and was given the green light to open accession negotiations in 2024, but the first intergovernmental conference has yet to take place. The country still needs to deliver key preliminary reforms, yet its post-Dayton political system allows pro-Russian leaders from Republika Srpska to block many state-level decisions. As Foreign Minister Elmedin Konaković put it during this year's GLOBSEC conference in Prague: "Can you imagine the Ukrainian parliament with the Donbas representatives, controlled completely by Putin, with veto rights, and you are asking them to deliver on pro-European reforms? That is our position today."

There is also **Turkey**, a sort of veteran candidate country. It first applied for membership in the European Communities in 1987, was granted candidate status in 1999 and formally opened accession negotiations in 2005. Sixteen negotiating chapters have been opened and only one provisionally closed. However, the accession process has been frozen since 2018

because of democratic backsliding, concerns over the rule of law and the increasingly authoritarian policies of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

And finally, **Ukraine and Moldova**—the two countries whose accession paths have so far been closely intertwined, with major milestones reached almost simultaneously. They both applied for EU membership in March 2022, just days after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In less than two and a half years, they progressed from submitting their applications to opening formal accession negotiations. Their unprecedented pace stands in stark contrast to that of the Western Balkan candidates and represents one of the fastest advances in the history of EU enlargement.

Both countries now want to open all negotiating clusters as quickly as possible, ideally by the end of this year. Yet their ambition is increasingly meeting hesitation among several member states, raising broader questions: Do we really want to admit new members anytime soon? Is the European Union institutionally and financially ready? Or should it first reform itself to avoid repeating the mistakes and challenges revealed by previous enlargements?

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PAULINA: There is clearly renewed determination among EU leaders to move the enlargement process forward. With Russia threatening the security of the continent, the geopolitical landscape shifting and global powers competing for influence, enlargement is increasingly presented as a geopolitical necessity rather than merely an economic or bureaucratic process.

"The Western Balkans are an integral part of the European Union's future. Their accession remains our priority and a crucial geopolitical investment. The process is, and will remain, grounded in merit and credible reforms," said António Costa, President of the European Council, at the EU–Western Balkans Summit held in Tivat, Montenegro, on 5 June 2026.

He added that the European Union is now closer to its next enlargement than at any time since Croatia joined the bloc in 2013.

"For the first time since 2013, we are really counting down to the next enlargement—for Montenegro to become the 28th member state by 2028," he said.

Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, has also called for the enlargement process to become more dynamic while remaining merit-based. Speaking at the same summit, she argued that a merit-based process does not have to be a slow one.

"Merit-based does not mean slow. Merit-based means fair and predictable," she said.

Supporters see enlargement as an opportunity to strengthen security and stability across the continent, expand the EU's single market, increase its global political and economic influence and prevent countries in its immediate neighbourhood from falling under the influence of Russia, China, or other external powers. They also argue that the prospect of membership remains one of the EU's most effective tools for encouraging democratic, economic and institutional reforms in candidate countries.

It also seems that at time of growing geopolitical uncertainty, the European Union itself has become increasingly attractive. Except ten countries formally in the accessions process there are others who consider whether European path could serve them. On 29 August, Icelanders

will vote in a referendum that could shape the country's European future. In Greenland, renewed pressure from the United States has revived debate over whether the island should once again seek closer ties with the EU after leaving the European Communities in 1985. And while often made half-jokingly, calls for Canada to join the European Union have also entered public debate—another sign that, in an increasingly unpredictable world, the European project is seen by many as a source of stability, prosperity and security.

But there are also concerns. The key questions accompanying today's enlargement debate include the following:

- Can a European Union of as many as 35 members make decisions efficiently under its current institutional framework, in which some of the most important decisions on foreign policy, security, and the EU budget still require unanimity?
- Are European societies—which are already facing growing Euroscepticism, political polarization and the rise of nationalist and far-right parties—prepared for the political and social challenges of another enlargement?
- Can an EU budget already under pressure from rising defence expenditure bear the financial costs? Each new member would become eligible for EU funding, particularly from the Cohesion Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy. The European Commission estimates that welcoming Montenegro into the Union would require a financial package of approximately 3.2 billion euros under the next long-term EU budget—and Montenegro is one of the smallest candidate countries.
- Can the European Union simultaneously manage enlargement while responding to the climate crisis and carrying out an expensive economic, industrial, and energy transition?

We want to check how are these questions debated across today's European Union. Are governments trying to build public support for enlargement, or are political parties increasingly using fears about new members for domestic political gain? Could bilateral disputes and unresolved historical grievances once again slow down the accession process?

To find out, we asked our partners across Europe, from Latvia and Croatia. Our colleagues Irena Frlan Gašparović and Jasmin Klarić from the Croatian news outlet *Telegram* explain how enlargement is viewed in Croatian politics—and why broad support for enlargement becomes much more complicated when specific candidate countries enter the discussion.

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CROATIA's input

Irena: Hi everyone, my name is Irena Frlan Gašparović, I'm a journalist for the Croatian media outlet Telegram. Here with me is my colleague Jasmin Klarić, our senior political journalist. Today we are talking about EU enlargement, and you might wonder why we need an expert on domestic politics for this, but we will explain that shortly.

First, just a few words on Croatia's official position on EU enlargement. As you know, Croatia is the newest EU member state. We entered the EU in 2013 and there has been no further enlargement since then.

Mainstream Croatian political parties support EU enlargement, at least in principle, but when it comes to the details, things tend to get a little bit more complicated. Jasmin will

explain why. The government is also supportive of enlargement, especially in the Western Balkans, and it sees it as crucial for regional stability, security and economic development.

But as I said, the devil is in the details. In Croatia, enlargement is rarely discussed within a broader context. For instance, there is no deeper public or political debate regarding the geopolitical significance of enlargement or what the accession of countries like Ukraine or Moldova would mean for the EU.

The ongoing political debate mostly has a local domestic political undertone. Jasmin, could you clarify a bit why this is the case?

Jasmin: Because of the politics, of the domestic politics, because of the elections, because of the balance of power in the governing coalition that is comprised by Croatian Democratic Union and Homeland Movement. Croatian Democratic Union is a big center-right party in Croatia, member of the EPP, and Homeland Movement is a far-right party. And they have the majority in the parliament together, these two parties.

And it's not that kind of battle yet. It's not that open contested political topic, the enlargement of the EU, but it's going to be. If Serbia, God forbid, just joking, gets closer to the EU, then it's going to become very messy in Croatian politics.

Why? Because far-right parties, Homeland Movement and other extra-parliamentary far-right parties or smaller opposition right parties will for sure try to ask for more toughness on Serbia accession and on relations with Serbia. So whenever that happens, it's going to be very, very ugly political fighting here, especially if that happens during maybe some government that would be led by the center or center-left political parties, then Croatian Democratic Union will also probably make problems even if they are now keen on the enlargement on the countries in the region.

Irena: And one of the reasons is surely the unresolved bilateral issues that Croatia has with Serbia, but also with some other countries who want to join the EU. We still vividly remember how much frustration it caused here in Croatia when Slovenia used the negotiations to resolve open issues, for instance, border disputes. But in 2011, I think, after we concluded our accession negotiations, Croatian parliament even passed a declaration stating that bilateral issues must not block the accession process.

Do you think anyone remembers that even or do you think the negotiation process will be used to try and resolve open issues with our neighbors?

Jasmin: I'm sure that a lot of politicians remember the declaration, but I'm even more sure that they will fake that they are not remembering it when it comes to the European enlargement. We had a few days ago, Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs saying that it is essential for Montenegro accession to the EU to resolve bilateral issues with Croatia, for example, training ship Jadran that Montenegro should hand back to Croatia, or paying reparations for convicts of Montenegrin camps during the war in the 90s. So the declaration of Croatian parliament is mostly dead letters on the paper and mostly forgotten.

Yes, of course.

Irena: So it's pretty clear that even though that we were frustrated with the way Slovenia used the negotiations that this scenario can repeat also.

Jasmin: Croatia uses this scenario already.

Irena: So does the government and the ruling coalition has the public support in this?

Jasmin: I think it's very hard to have a precise answer to that question because there is no public opinion polls on that.

Irena: But what do you think that people think about the enlargement? Do you agree that much like the government, the people support admitting new members, at least in principle, until we get to specific countries with specific open issues again? Do you think that's correct?

Jasmin: Well, it's very hard to say. And it depends a lot on how the political parties in power are going to paint that picture in the time when it comes to the Croatian decision about enlargement. If political parties decide to say, oh no, we don't want Montenegro in the European Union because they attacked Croatia during the 90s with Serbia. They are not returning that training ship and other things. And especially if this situation ever comes to Serbia joining the European Union, it's going to be very challenging to get the support of the Croatian public.

Irena: And finance.

Jasmin: Sorry. Even if it is in all the possible interests for Croatia, if you want security, if you want economy, anything, the deepest interest of Croatia, tactical and strategical, is to include all these countries in the neighborhood in the European Union.

Irena: And finally, we must mention EU reform before admitting new members. One of the reforms discussed in this context is the decision-making process in foreign policy, shifting from unanimity to a qualified majority. It is often emphasized that this would not apply to the final decision on enlargement, meaning every member state could still use veto at the very end of the process.

But still, I cannot imagine any Croatian government would agree to the idea of abolishing the unanimity principle in foreign affairs. The current prime minister is against it. The ruling coalition is against it.

But even if that was not the case, he or any other prime minister would be under enormous pressure not to agree to it, including from the president of the republic, right?

Jasmin: He even called an act of saying, okay, it's okay for Croatia to let go of the veto in the voting in the European Union. Milanović said that it would be high treason to take such stance. And it is extremely important to underline that this is maybe the only topic, apart from, I don't know, cheering for Croatian football national team, that the prime minister and president of the republic agree. The only one.

Irena: Okay, thank you, Jasmin, for explaining why the EU enlargement is so important for Croatia, but also the topic of the heated public and political debate. I hope we managed to explain to our listeners a little bit how Croatia thinks about the future EU enlargement.

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PAULINA: Croatia illustrates how support for enlargement can quickly become entangled in domestic politics, historical grievances and bilateral disputes. It also shows that, despite growing calls for institutional reform and concerns about whether a European Union of 35 member states could function effectively while unanimity remains required in key policy areas, national governments may find it extremely difficult to give up their veto powers.

But that is not the only perspective within today's European Union.

For some countries on the EU's eastern flank, enlargement is first and foremost a security issue. Latvia, which borders Russia and has been among Ukraine's strongest supporters since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, sees the accession of countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Montenegro not only as an opportunity to strengthen the European Union, but also to strengthen Europe's collective security.

Our next perspective comes from Latvia. Annija Vīnkalna, a journalist with the Latvian news outlet TVNET, explains why, in Riga, enlargement is viewed much more as a geopolitical necessity than as a political dilemma.

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ANNIJA: Latvia maintains good relations with all major candidate countries and there are no political obstacles to Latvia's support for further EU enlargement. The only requirement is that the candidate countries implement necessary reforms and fulfill the Copenhagen criteria.

In 2023, the Latvian Parliament unanimously adopted a statement supporting the launch of EU accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova.

Latvia's highest-ranking officials have consistently been strong supporters of Ukraine's and Moldova's EU membership aspirations. In May 2026, Latvia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Baiba Braže, urged the EU Foreign Affairs Council to open accession negotiation chapters with Ukraine and Moldova as soon as possible.

And the same position was reiterated by the President of Latvia, Edgars Rinkēvičs, when he welcomed Yuliya Svyrydenko, then Prime Minister of Ukraine, to Riga in June.

When discussing Ukraine's bid to join the EU, Latvian officials typically emphasize the security dimension of enlargement.

President Rinkēvičs has stated that Ukraine's European integration is an essential component of the EU's security architecture, while also serving the security interests of both Latvia and Europe as a whole.

Latvia also supports Ukraine's future membership in NATO once the war started by Russia's full-scale invasion has ended and all the necessary interoperability and accession criteria have been fulfilled.

Regarding the Western Balkan candidate countries, Latvia has been sharing expertise gained during its own EU accession process more than two decades ago. Here, too, security considerations play a central role.

During the 2025 visit of Montenegro's Deputy Prime Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, Filip Ivanović, Latvia's Foreign Minister Baiba Braže welcomed Montenegro's progress towards EU membership. She also highlighted the close security cooperation between the two NATO allies and noted that Montenegro already aligns its foreign policy with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, including the implementation of all EU sanctions against Russia and Belarus.

Overall, Latvia's openness to EU enlargement stems from the fact that Latvia sees like-minded partners in the candidate countries that are currently actively pursuing an EU membership. Politically, Latvia has a lot in common with Ukraine, Moldova and even

Montenegro. If these countries become EU member states, they are likely to support a similar point of view to Latvia's on issues related to security and foreign policy. As of now, there are no serious political or economic points of contention between Latvia and the most active candidate countries.

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Paulina:

Latvia's perspective is striking because it shows almost no tension between support for enlargement and national interests. Poland's debate has evolved quite differently.

In the first months after Russia's full-scale invasion, support for Ukraine's and Moldova's European future was almost unquestioned across most of the Polish political spectrum. Supporting Ukraine's EU aspirations was seen as an act of solidarity with a country fighting for its survival. Few people expected membership to become a realistic prospect anytime soon.

As the accession process accelerated, however, the discussion became much more practical. Questions emerged about agriculture, road transport, cohesion funding and the future of the single market. Farmers' protests against Ukrainian agricultural imports and disputes over road transport became symbols of growing concerns that Polish companies would have to compete with Ukrainian producers under different conditions.

These often legitimate economic concerns were amplified by electoral campaigning and Russian disinformation. Moscow has systematically exploited such economic concerns, as well as difficult historical issues—particularly the Volhynia massacres and the legacy of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA)—to deepen divisions between Poles and Ukrainians and weaken support for Ukraine across Europe.

The first political forces to capitalize on these changing sentiments were the far-right parties. Confederation and Grzegorz Braun's Confederation of the Polish Crown oppose further EU enlargement altogether and strongly reject Ukraine's future membership. They argue that enlargement would threaten Polish agriculture, weaken national sovereignty and eventually lead to the abolition of national veto powers inside the European Union.

Law and Justice followed a more gradual path.

When Russia launched its full-scale invasion, the PiS government was among Ukraine's strongest supporters. President Andrzej Duda repeatedly advocated Ukraine's future membership in the European Union, while Jarosław Kaczyński described Ukraine as belonging to the Western political community, even if accession would take many years.

Over time, however, the party's rhetoric became increasingly conditional. By 2025, PiS argued that Ukraine must fulfil every accession criterion and the Poland's priority should be to fully protect Polish economic interests. By 2026, senior party leaders openly called for blocking further negotiating clusters with Ukraine until historical disputes—particularly those related to Volhynia—had been resolved.

The narrative of the governing coalition has also evolved over time.

Unlike the opposition, it still officially supports Ukraine's European future and continues to describe enlargement as strategically important for European security. At the same time, its rhetoric has become much more cautious than it was in 2022.

Government ministers increasingly emphasize that there can be no shortcuts in the accession process, that every candidate must meet exactly the same standards and that the European Union itself will probably require institutional reform before admitting new members which would not happen anytime soon.

The smaller coalition parties remain broadly supportive. The Left most explicitly backs the European aspirations of Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans. However more and more the governing coalition refrains from openly supporting future enlargement.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the Polish debate is what is missing.

There is almost no serious public discussion about the enlargement of the European Union as a whole. Montenegro, Albania, Moldova or the Western Balkans receive very little attention. There is little debate about how a Union of more than thirty members should function or how enlargement should be reconciled with institutional reform.

Instead, enlargement has become almost entirely synonymous with Ukraine. And Ukraine is increasingly discussed through the lenses of agriculture, historical memory and domestic politics rather than Europe's long-term strategic future.

PAULINA:

What are the conclusions? Two things become increasingly clear. The next enlargement will almost certainly not resemble any of the previous ones. The candidate countries are progressing at very different speeds, face very different challenges and enjoy very different levels of political support among today's member states. Another "big bang" enlargement now seems highly unlikely.

Except that European leaders and European public will have to finally respond to questions: are we ready to enlarge and how can Europe do it without weakening itself?

That is precisely the discussion now taking place in Brussels. The European Commission is preparing proposals to reshape the enlargement process, including stronger safeguards against democratic backsliding, gradual integration of candidate countries into selected EU policies before full membership, and reforms aimed at ensuring that a larger Union can continue to function effectively. Such provisions will be included in Montenegro's accession treaty.

The debate about enlargement is no longer only about those who want to join the European Union. It is equally about what kind of European Union we want to build in the decades to come.

Thank you for listening to the LENS EU Podcast.

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