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How Decisive Are the Copenhagen Criteria for EU Enlargement?³

The article analyses the significance of the accession criteria in the context of recent EU enlargement negotiations, particularly during heightened geopolitical circumstances triggered by Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The accelerated EU enlargement process, evidenced by the swift membership applications from Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, and the even quicker decision to open accession negotiations for two of them, inspires an exploration of the binding elements, specifically the Copenhagen criteria, integral to the accession negotiation process. The study aims to examine the numerical development and changes in the conditions and criteria necessary for EU membership in ten candidate and potential candidate countries. The analysis focuses on fulfilling essential conditions, with emphasis on convergence, assessed using GDP per capita and growth rates, as well as the rule of law and democracy criteria measured through the Worldwide Governance Indicators.

Keywords: EU, enlargement, accession, Copenhagen criteria

Introduction

The EU enlargement became a very hot topic in the everyday news in the past two years not only because the “EU enlargement is a driving force for long-term stability, peace and prosperity across the continent” as we can read in the EU Commission’s communication,⁴ but because of the geopolitical significance of EU enlargement which was strengthened by the start of Russia’s war against Ukraine.⁵ On 28 February 2022, five days after Russia launched its aggression, Ukraine submitted its application for EU membership. Moldova and Georgia applied on the 22nd of March.

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⁴ European Commission 2023.

⁵ STANICEK–PRZETACZNIK 2023.

Enlargement policy has increasingly appeared in the press not only because of these special geopolitical circumstances but also because the process became much faster than during the previous enlargements. The EU's communication on the membership applications of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia created an uproar among Western Balkan countries.⁶ Although the accession process might seem to look a lot quicker, one needs to be aware of the fact that it does not mean a quick membership. This is because, in the accession negotiation, there are binding elements a country has to keep when wishes to become a member state of the EU. These are the so-called Copenhagen criteria. This article deals with these binding criteria and how the EU holds the countries to account for these conditions.

The membership conditions (most of them are set out in the treaties on the EU, see later in the literature review section) are formulated as a quality principle to which the countries wishing to join the EU must conform. But we supposed that these conditions and criteria can be formulated as numerical conditions, too and can be measured, and if so, improvements can be seen in these numbers. We were interested if these Copenhagen criteria are met in case these countries really become members of the EU. On the other hand, if a country is far from reaching the Copenhagen criteria will its membership date be postponed.

The aim of this article is to examine how the conditions and criteria necessary for joining the EU developed and changed numerically in the ten candidate and potential candidate countries, namely Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine. We analysed these countries from the point of view of how well they fulfil the Copenhagen and other criteria necessary for joining the EU. The rule of law and democracy criteria can be best measured by using the Worldwide Governance Indicators.⁷ What can still be measured relatively objectively is convergence, which requires initial GDP per capita data and growth rates in a certain period of time.

The paper is organised as follows: After the introductory part, a literature review on the most important questions of EU enlargement and accession criteria is presented. We start with assessing the length and phases of the accession process and show the recent status and historical timeline for each of the accession candidates. After this, we explain the accession criteria as well as collect and introduce the most important indexes these criteria can be measured with, still under the section *Literature review*. In the *Methodology* section, our analysis is explained and the main findings on the candidate countries' WGI scores and convergence processes are presented. The article concludes with some remarks on the EU policy.

Literature review

To see how well joining countries fulfil the accession or Copenhagen criteria and other preconditions necessary for joining the EU, we needed to answer several questions:

⁶ MIREL 2022.

⁷ KAUFMANN-KRAAY 2023.



1. How long does the accession process typically take?
2. What are the phases of the accession process?
3. What are the accession criteria and did they change over time?
4. How can we assess or measure fulfilling the criteria?

The length of the accession process

In December 2023, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia received the EU approval to start accession negotiations amidst Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁸ However, the EU accession process is complex and lengthy, with no guaranteed swift membership neither a fast compliance with EU law.⁹ Preliminary forecasts suggest Ukraine's negotiations could start in March 2024 first. European Council President Charles Michel envisions EU membership for Ukraine by 2030 if both sides fulfil their responsibilities, although the Ukrainian Government aims for a faster integration.¹⁰

EU accession, regulated by Article 49 of the Treaty on the European Union,¹¹ requires a candidate state to be European and uphold common values.¹² Membership is not automatic and involves a pre-accession period for the country to align with EU standards. The accession process duration varies historically: e.g. Austria, Finland and Sweden negotiated in two years, while in case of Croatia it lasted almost eight. The calculation of the length of the process can be different. According to Bevington (2020), on average, it takes around five years from the start of negotiations, but a Pew Research Center analysis¹³ indicates an average of nine years for the 21 current non-founding EU members.¹⁴ The timeline depends on internal and external political actions and on the time the applicant needs for legal reforms to meet the EU requirements and the way we calculate these numbers.

Figure 1 illustrates the time taken by current EU members to join. Candidacy status granted takes about 3.5 years on average for current EU members. Ukraine and Moldova achieved candidacy status approximately eleven times quicker than that of the average, taking about four months. Greece achieved candidacy in around eight months, while Malta and Ireland took the longest at 9.4 and 8.4 years, respectively.¹⁵

⁸ European Council 2023.

⁹ BÖRZEL–SEDELMEIER 2017: 197–215.

¹⁰ BECKER 2023.

¹¹ See <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/eut/teu/article/49> and European Commission 2023.

¹² These are human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities (Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, see <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/eut/teu/title/I?view=plain>).

¹³ LEPPERT 2022.

¹⁴ Rebecca Leppert calculated the total length of the accession process for each country using the exact dates of application submission and official accession. For more details on how she did her calculations see LEPPERT 2022.

¹⁵ LEPPERT 2022.



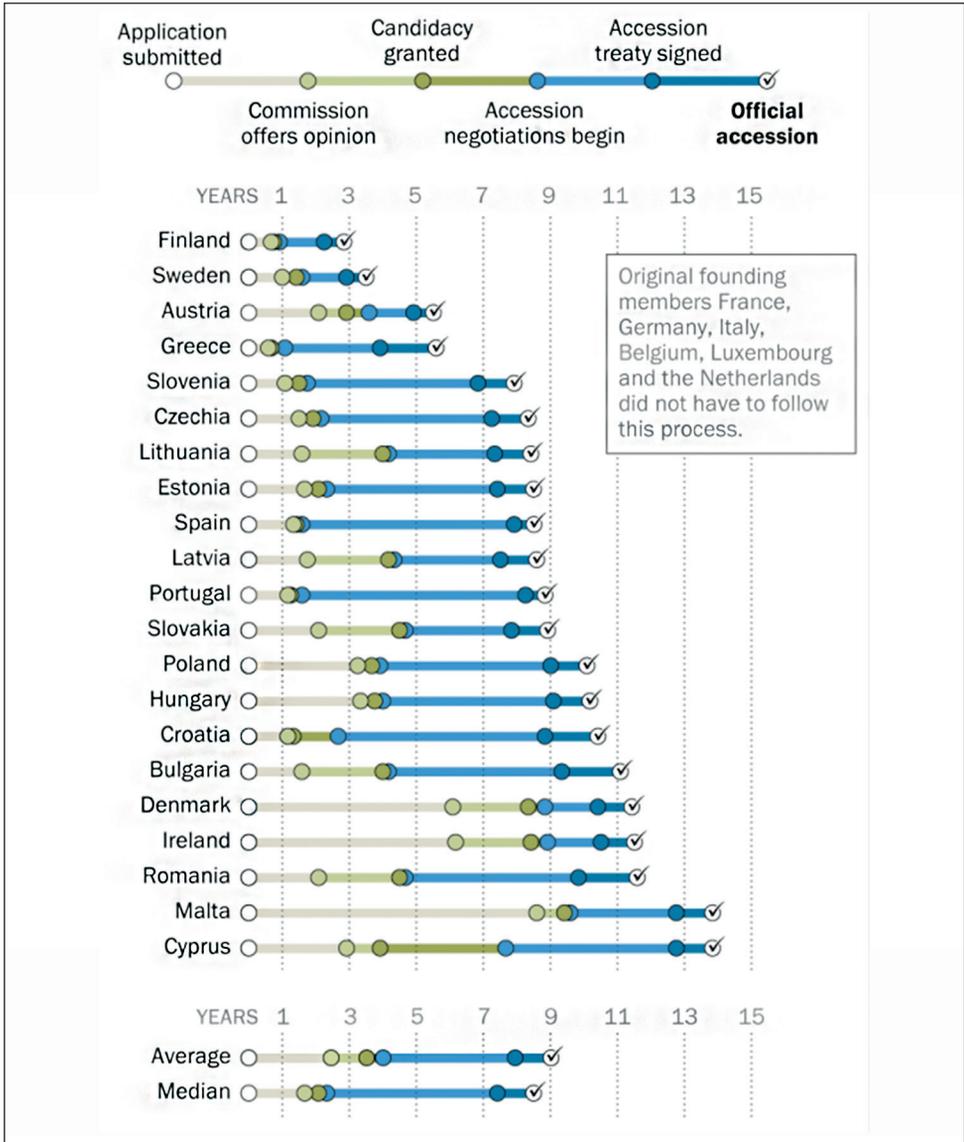


Figure 1: Amount of time each step took for current member countries to join the EU (in years)

Note: From 1967 to 1992, the European Communities served as a legal predecessor of the EU. The total length of the accession process for each country is calculated using the exact dates of application submission and official accession; all other calculations are based on the first day of the month of the first event to the first day of the month of the second event.

Source: LEPPERT 2022.



Phases of the accession process

The process of joining the EU (accession process), broadly consists of three stages according to the European Commission:¹⁶ candidate status, accession negotiations and treaty ratification. But as Leppert (2022) indicates, we can differentiate 5 different phases: 1. from the application submitted to the Commission offering opinion; 2. from the Commission's opinion to candidacy granted by the European Council; 3. from the granted candidacy to the beginning of the formal negotiations; 4. from the membership negotiations to the treaty signed; and finally 5. from the signature of the accession treaty to the official joining date (as we can see in the upper part of Figure 1). According to the changes of "Revised enlargement methodology" from a few years ago, there are nine consecutive steps.¹⁷

When a country applied for membership, it submitted the application to the Council (1), and the Commission gave its opinion (2), the country can gain official candidate status (3), but formal negotiations may not have opened yet.¹⁸ Those can be opened first after the European Council unanimously grants candidacy (still step 3) based on the European Commission's recommendation. Once the conditions have been met, the accession negotiations are opened, with the agreement of all member states (4). Then the Council and the candidate country agree on a framework for accession negotiations (5), leading to formal membership negotiations, accompanied by financial and technical assistance.

Accession negotiations begin as the candidate country aligns national laws with EU rules (called the *acquis*), involving reforms for compliance with accession criteria (see later for more details). Negotiations conclude when all 35 *acquis* chapters, (covering topics like free movement of goods and workers, competition and taxation), are unanimously closed (6). Recent changes divide negotiating chapters into six thematic clusters,¹⁹ and emphasise fundamentals like the rule of law and the functioning of democratic institutions. These adjustments aim to demand more from candidate countries and enhance the negotiating process.²⁰

When the negotiations and accompanying reforms have been completed to the satisfaction of both sides (8) and after the Commission has given its opinion on the readiness of the country to become a member state (7), an accession treaty is signed (9). The treaty is not final until it receives approval from the European Parliament, the Commission and the EU Council. Once signed by representatives of every member state in the EU as well as the applicant nation, it will become legally binding. The candidate nation and each

¹⁶ European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations 2023.

¹⁷ See European Commission 2022; STANICEK-PRZETACZNIK 2023: 5.

¹⁸ These different phases have different lengths and different influences on the candidate countries' economic and political performance. Some studies show that political influence on the applicant countries can be greatest when deciding to open these accession negotiations (see e.g. HAUGHTON 2007: 233–246).

¹⁹ The six thematic clusters are the following: 1. Fundamentals; 2. Internal market; 3. Competitiveness and inclusive growth; 4. Green agenda and sustainable connectivity; 5. Resources, agriculture and cohesion; 6. External relations (see European Commission 2020b; STANICEK-PRZETACZNIK 2023).

²⁰ European Commission 2020a.



member state of the EU must ratify it in accordance with their respective constitutions (parliamentary vote, referendum, etc.). The country is then an “accessing country” until the official accession date, marking its full EU membership.²¹

Accession countries today

There are ten countries officially in the process of accession today (31 December 2023). Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey with the recently involved countries of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (see Table 1). And as we noted earlier Charles Michel expects (some of) them to be members by 2030.²²

Table 1: Status of current EU accession candidates (December 2023)

	Status (date of application and candidate status if granted)	Stage (most important and recent milestones reached)
Albania	Candidate country April 2009: Application for EU membership June 2014: European Council grants candidate status	April 2018: Commission recommends opening of accession negotiations June and October 2019: Council postponed the decision to open negotiations July 2022: Start of the screening process July 2023: The European Commission submitted to the Council the screening report on Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, including benchmarks for opening accession negotiations on this cluster
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Candidate country February 2016: Application for EU membership December 2022: European Council grants candidate status	November 2023: Commission recommends opening negotiations, once the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria is achieved December 2023: European Council decides it will open accession negotiations, once the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria is achieved
Kosovo	Potential candidate December 2022: Application for EU membership	July 2018: Commission confirms that Kosovo has fulfilled all outstanding visa liberalisation benchmarks March and April 2023: Council and Parliament adopt regulation paving the way for visa liberalisation to start on 1 January 2024
Montenegro	Candidate country December 2008: Application for EU membership December 2010: European Council grants candidate status	June 2012: European Council decides to open accession negotiations June 2020: All 33 screened chapters have been opened, three of which are provisionally closed June and December 2021: Political Intergovernmental Conferences under the revised enlargement methodology

²¹ See LEPPERT 2022.

²² See BECKER 2023.



	Status (date of application and candidate status if granted)	Stage (most important and recent milestones reached)
North Macedonia	<p>Candidate country December 2004: Application for EU membership December 2005: European Council grants candidate status</p>	<p>April 2018: Commission recommends opening accession negotiations June and October 2019: Council postponed the decision to open negotiations March 2020: The members of the European Council endorsed the General Affairs Council’s decision to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia July 2022: Start of the screening process July 2023: The European Commission submitted to the Council the screening report on Cluster 1 – Fundamentals, including benchmarks for opening accession negotiations on this cluster</p>
Serbia	<p>Candidate country December 2009: Application for EU membership March 2012: European Council grants candidate status</p>	<p>June 2013: European Council decides to open accession negotiations June 2021: Political Intergovernmental Conferences under the revised enlargement methodology December 2021: 22 out of 35 screened chapters have been opened, two of which are provisionally closed</p>
Turkey	<p>Candidate country 1987: Turkey applied to join the EEC December 1999: European Council grants candidate status</p>	<p>December 1995: Creation of Customs Union btw EU + T October 2005: Accession negotiations started June 2016: Last negotiation round; 16 chapters are opened, one chapter is provisionally closed June 2018: Accession negotiations officially at a standstill July 2019: EU–Turkey Association Council, high-level political dialogue and sectoral dialogues on economy, energy and transport suspended by the Council March 2021: Launch of ‘positive agenda’</p>
Ukraine	<p>Candidate country February 2022: Application for EU membership June 2022: European Council grants candidate status</p>	<p>November 2023: Commission recommends opening negotiations, Ukraine included in the Enlargement Package reports for the first time December 2023: European Council decides to open accession negotiations</p>
Moldova	<p>Candidate country March 2022: Application for EU membership June 2022: European Council grants candidate status</p>	<p>November 2023: Commission recommends opening negotiations, Moldova included in the Enlargement Package reports for the first time December 2023: European Council decides to open accession negotiations</p>
Georgia	<p>Candidate country March 2022: Application for EU membership December 2023: European Council grants candidate status on the understanding a number of steps are taken</p>	<p>November 2023: Commission recommends candidate status on the understanding a number of steps are taken; Georgia included in the Enlargement Package reports for the first time December 2023: European Council grants candidate status on the understanding a number of steps are taken</p>

Source: Compiled by the authors based on STANICEK–PRZETACZNIK 2023 and different EU factsheets and factographs.



From Figure 1 and Table 1, we can see the slowing down of the EU accession process for these ten countries over the last decade, especially if we compare the speed to the 2004 and 2007 accession countries' joining periods. In case of the Western Balkan countries, they were offered the European perspective twenty years ago at the Thessaloniki European Council on 21 June 2003.²³ The lower enthusiasm among EU member states for the Western Balkan enlargement can be seen in the renewed EU enlargement strategy (or revised enlargement methodology) mentioned earlier. This strategy now emphasises the “fundamentals first” approach, prioritising the rule of law, early resolution of bilateral issues, and enhanced economic governance.²⁴

According to Aronin (2023), the EU is in the second phase of the enlargement speed, where it used the prospect of membership for the Western Balkan countries to encourage security guarantees. But in case of Central and Eastern European countries, all acceding states had an external security guarantor via NATO membership and the EU only required some institutional reforms. In case of Turkey, the EU deployed the prospect of membership to motivate difficult-to-implement democratic reform, and this serves as a reason for the very slow accession process.

There are several other reasons behind the longer joining process. A general “enlargement fatigue”, the consequences of the economic and migrant crisis, and even Brexit can be mentioned here. The accession process works today much more on an intergovernmental basis than this was the case during the large Eastern enlargement,²⁵ so member states matter in the formation of EU enlargement politics a lot.²⁶

We shall note that the length of the accession process can be viewed not only as a negative factor, as Börzel and Sedelmeier (2017) summarise the so-called legitimacy approach of the enlargement process and the non-compliance with EU laws. Whether a country follows the EU rules depends on how much it feels connected and agrees with the EU regulation itself. The longer a country is a member of the EU, the more it tends to follow the rules automatically because it sees them as normal. Joining the EU turns countries into members who naturally follow the rules. It's like a habit. However, when more countries join the EU, it might make following the rules harder. But in some cases, if countries have some connection to the EU before full membership, like through certain agreements or aligning their laws (e.g. the EFTA countries via the EEA, or the Central and Eastern European countries because of the more prominent pre-accession legislative alignment process), it can help them get used to the rules earlier. Overall, the idea is that countries might struggle to follow the rules at first, but over time, they tend to get better at it as they become more familiar with EU laws.

²³ Council of the European Union 2003.

²⁴ MIŠČEVIĆ–MRAK 2017: 185–204.

²⁵ MIŠČEVIĆ–MRAK 2017: 185–204.

²⁶ TURHAN 2016: 463–477.



Accession criteria, the so-called Copenhagen criteria

Over time, not only the EU's accession process but the accession criteria have become more complex. The criteria at the beginning of the European integration, set by the Treaty of Rome, allowed only European countries to apply for membership. The application, approved by the Council after obtaining the Commission's opinion, requires ratification by each Member State following its constitutional rules.²⁷ As the EU expanded, it developed a more complex set of criteria to ensure candidate countries are well-prepared to maximise membership benefits and minimise disadvantages.²⁸ This complexity is especially crucial in the context of admitting Central and Eastern European countries.

The so-called Copenhagen criteria (mentioned earlier), adopted at the 1993 Copenhagen European Council, are more complex and specific and needed for a more orderly accession process for a large number of countries.²⁹ The Copenhagen criteria are the following: 1. the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities; 2. the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union; 3. ability to take on the obligations of membership; 4. including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union;³⁰ 5. the Union's capacity to absorb new members, while maintaining the momentum of European integration.

The meeting of the European Council in Madrid has added another point, the administrative capacity of the candidate countries to be strengthened. When the countries of Central and Eastern Europe joined, more emphasis was placed on the rule of law and fundamental rights, with less attention paid to the readiness of their economies. The negative consequences of this were particularly evident with the accession of Romania and Bulgaria.³¹

The accession of Western Balkan states is reshaping the focus of enlargement mechanisms. Initially concentrated on justice, fundamental rights and home affairs, with an emphasis on the rule of law, the new EU enlargement strategy, since 2018, places greater emphasis on economic aspects like competitiveness and development. The European Commission now prioritises addressing issues such as unemployment, creating a better business environment, boosting productivity, removing financing constraints and reducing corruption. Despite continuous development of the enlargement toolbox, there is no single quantitative methodological tool introduced to measure the fulfilment of accession criteria.³²

²⁷ Treaty of Rome 1957: Article 237.

²⁸ PALÁNKAI 2010: 9–23.

²⁹ MOLNÁR 2018: 119–140.

³⁰ Criteria 3 and 4 are grouped together on the EU Glossary page (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:accession_criteria_copenhagen); FONTAINE 2018: 18.

³¹ TANKOVSKY–ENDRŐDI-KOVÁCS 2023: 3–30.

³² LÓRINCZNÉ BENCZE 2020: 75–97; TANKOVSKY–ENDRŐDI-KOVÁCS 2023: 3–30.



Measuring criteria, indicators and indexes

The criteria mentioned above are difficult to measure with specific indicators, as they often require complex and subjective assessment. The EU usually assesses the progress of candidate countries through annual reports and evaluations, but the process is not always easy to express in numbers or metrics.

Nevertheless, there is the notion of integration maturity,³³ through which authors already have tried to use specific indicators to approach and assess the performance of the candidates. According to Palánkai (2010), there are four dimensions of integration maturity: the economic, the political, the institutional and the social dimensions. In the case of economic dimensions authors³⁴ use different indicators for five different factors that are macroeconomic stability, functioning market economy, competitiveness, access to foreign finance and convergence. Macroeconomic stability can be approached by GDP growth data (e.g. from the World Development Indicators),³⁵ inflation and unemployment data and using balance of payment data, too. For the factor functioning market economy, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index or the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development transition indicators can be used as a good approach.³⁶ For measuring competitiveness, the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index can be useful and for assessing the access to foreign finance the FDI data can be used.³⁷

On the political and social dimension of the integration maturity measurement, using the study of Schroeder (2009) we can differentiate several different indicators and indexes. For example, in the area of the rule of law, the fight against corruption could be assessed and measured by the corruption-to-GDP ratio or Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index. The institutional capacity, administrative efficiency and the performance of the judicial system can also be measured by the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, the Worldwide Governance Indicators,³⁸ the Open Budget Index or the Civil Society Index.³⁹

However, qualitative analysis and expert opinion are often important in the evaluation, as the assessment of the Copenhagen criteria is not only about quantifiable factors but also involves a deep understanding of them. In the following section, we decided to use mainly the World Development Indicators⁴⁰ and the Worldwide Governance Indicators⁴¹ mainly for convenience reasons.

³³ PALÁNKAI 2010: 9–23.

³⁴ ŠILJAK–NIELSEN 2023: 136–155; TANKOVSKY–ENDRÓDI-KOVÁCS 2023: 3–30.

³⁵ WDI 2023.

³⁶ See ŠILJAK–NIELSEN 2023: 136–155.

³⁷ For more details see TANKOVSKY–ENDRÓDI-KOVÁCS 2023: 3–30.

³⁸ KAUFMANN–KRAAY 2023.

³⁹ For more details see SCHROEDER 2009: 1–61.

⁴⁰ WDI 2023.

⁴¹ KAUFMANN–KRAAY 2023.



Methodology

We aim to analyse mainly the candidate countries from the point of view of how well they fulfil the Copenhagen and other criteria necessary for joining the EU. The rule of law and democracy criteria can be best measured by using the WGI territories. What can still be measured relatively objectively is convergence, which requires initial GDP per capita data and growth rates in a given period of time. Below you can clearly see that WGI territories approximate the accession criteria quite well. We will denote these areas with the two-letter abbreviations (see below).

The WGI⁴² features six aggregate governance indicators for over 200 countries and territories over the period 1996–2022:⁴³

- Voice and Accountability (VA)
- Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism (PS)
- Government Effectiveness (GE)
- Regulatory Quality (RQ)
- Rule of Law (RL)
- Control of Corruption (CC)

Since the above database is rather incomplete for the years before 2000, we mainly compare the previous performances of those countries that joined after 2004 and the candidate and potential candidate countries that have not yet joined. So further on we will concentrate mainly on these two groups. The examined period is from 2000 to 2022. In cross-sectional analysis, we mostly took the data of 2022 into account. When examining the convergence, we took the year 2000 as the starting point, and the growth rate was calculated using the geometric mean formula between the years 2000 and 2022.

In addition, convergence is also an important condition that can be tested with GDP per capita and economic growth data. In our sample, there were originally 52 countries that we sorted into four quartiles based on their GDP per capita in the year 2022. So the following table (Table 2) shows the countries in descending order of GDP per capita grouped in four quartiles (Q1–Q4).

We also grouped the countries as old EU members, ‘newly’ joined members (countries joined after 2004), candidates or none of the earlier groups. Candidate and potential candidate countries are at the focal point of our analysis, those are the following: from the Western Balkans Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia; the newcomers are Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine; and finally Turkey. Countries that joined after 2004 and the candidate countries have been highlighted with different colours.

⁴² KAUFMANN–KRAAY 2023.

⁴³ These abbreviations are also used in Table 3.



Table 2: List of countries in descending order of GDP per capita in 2022

Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Monaco	Belgium	Lithuania	Bosnia and Herzegovina
Luxembourg	Germany	Poland	Belarus
Ireland	Andorra	Latvia	Azerbaijan
Switzerland	France	Croatia	North Macedonia
Norway	Italy	Hungary	Georgia
Denmark	Cyprus	Turkey	Albania
Iceland	Spain	Romania	Armenia
Sweden	Slovenia	Kazakhstan	Kosovo
The Netherlands	Portugal	The Russian Federation	Moldova
The United Kingdom	Estonia	Bulgaria	Uzbekistan
Finland	Greece	Montenegro	Ukraine
Austria	The Czech Republic	Serbia	Tajikistan
San Marino	Slovakia	Turkmenistan	Kyrgyzstan

Note: Quartiles are based on GDP per capita in the year of 2022.

Source: WDI 2023.

The 10 countries that joined in 2004: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. Romania and Bulgaria joined the European Union in 2007. Finally, Croatia was the last to join the community in 2013.

Candidate scores based on WGI territories

The following table (Table 3) shows the WGI data of ten candidate and potential candidate members. These scores can spread between -2.5 and $+2.5$. Since it is only a ranking, the scores can be interpreted on an ordinal scale, and so the median and average mean the same. Considering all the countries of the world, 0 means an average (median) value, and a negative score means a value worse than average (median). These countries, the ten candidate and potential candidate states are therefore not doing too badly compared to the world average, but as we will see later they are far behind the newly joined members (countries joined after 2004). Ukraine, full of negative scores, performs particularly poorly in the field of political stability. In Turkey, political stability is the second worst among the present candidates. Ukraine is in a worse situation than Turkey in terms of corruption, only Bosnia and Herzegovina's situation is slightly gloomier. In terms of the rule of law, Ukraine is the worst performer, the Balkan countries are closer to zero, which means a better position.



Table 3: WGI scores in candidate countries in 2022

Country Name	CC	GE	PS	RQ	RL	VA
Albania	-0.41	0.07	0.11	0.16	-0.17	0.14
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.68	-1.06	-0.44	-0.16	-0.31	-0.33
Georgia	0.62	0.65	-0.44	1.03	0.17	0.01
Kosovo	-0.26	-0.19	-0.25	-0.39	-0.37	-0.06
Moldova	-0.34	-0.31	-0.67	0.10	-0.29	0.09
Montenegro	-0.12	-0.03	-0.06	0.54	-0.13	0.27
North Macedonia	-0.32	-0.08	0.12	0.45	-0.10	0.16
Serbia	-0.46	0.07	-0.17	0.14	-0.11	-0.10
Turkey	-0.47	-0.20	-1.04	-0.24	-0.46	-0.93
Ukraine	-0.63	-0.50	-2.00	-0.33	-0.92	-0.02

Source: KAUFMANN–KRAAY 2023.

The following figure (Figure 2) shows that countries joined after 2004 perform better in terms of WGI indicators. Among the candidate countries, Georgia comes closest to those joined after 2004, but it is obvious (apparent) that they perform very poorly in terms of political stability. Among these EU countries, Bulgaria performs the worst in this regard. In Figure 2, it is also clear that candidate countries reach generally lower scores than the newly joined members. It is also apparent that the countries wishing to join perform worse in terms of corruption and political stability than the newly joined members. If we were to take these indicators into account when joining, we could say that Ukraine, Turkey and even Bosnia and Herzegovina are very far from membership. They should improve their scores in many fields.

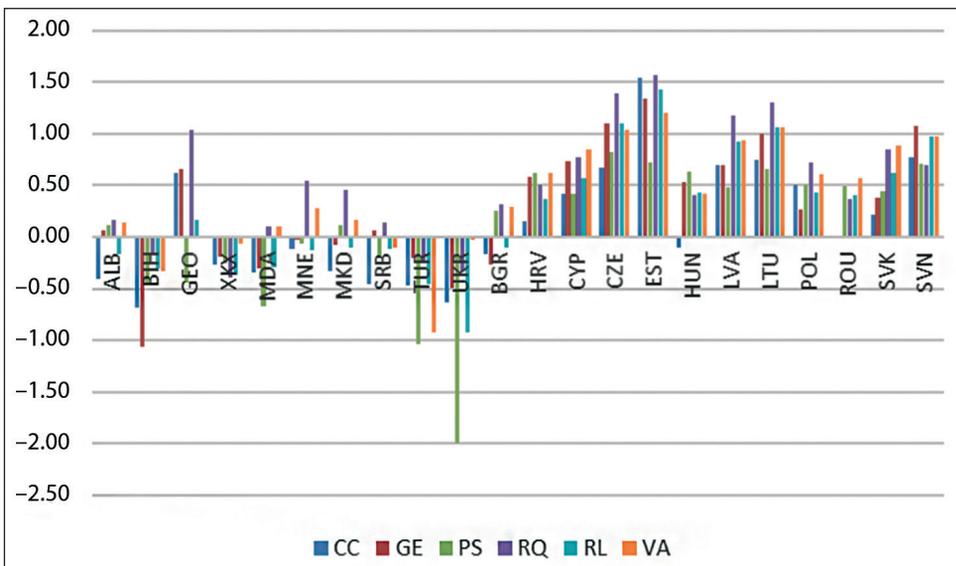


Figure 2: WGI scores in candidate and newly joined countries

Source: KAUFMANN–KRAAY 2023.



Convergence

The following figure (Figure 3) shows that candidate countries are poorer than newly joined countries. This value (GDP per capita in 2022) is shown by the second (red) bar for each country. Among the newly joined countries, Cyprus was originally the richest and retained its leading position even with a low growth rate. Slovenia was also considered relatively rich in this group and kept its position, although many Eastern European countries came significantly closer to it. Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland also surpassed Hungary in these last two decades.

As we know, poorer countries within a group have a greater chance of growing faster than rich countries. This is primarily the nature of capital accumulation and the marginal product of capital. We can also explain it with technological development, underdeveloped countries can copy new technologies. This is called the advantage of backwardness.⁴⁴ In those poorer countries that are not able to catch up even for a long period of time, there are probably fundamental institutional problems.

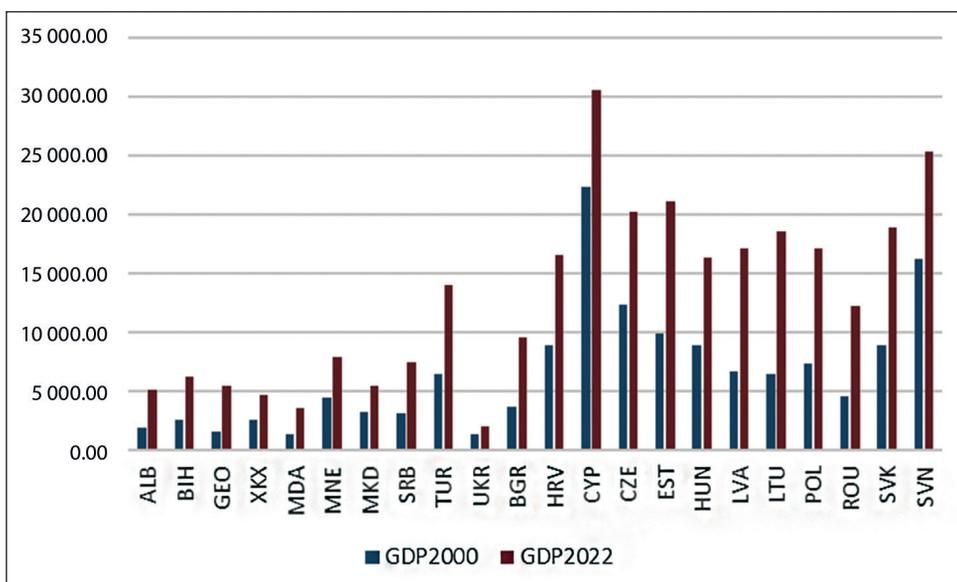


Figure 3: GDP per capita in 2000 and 2022 in candidate and newly joined countries (constant 2015 US\$)

Source: WDI 2023.

In the next figure (Figure 4), we can see the same data as the previous one, but the focus has been narrowed down to the ten candidate countries. So it is much clearer how the candidate countries started in the last two decades and how much they were able to catch up.

⁴⁴ SOLOW 1956: 65–94.



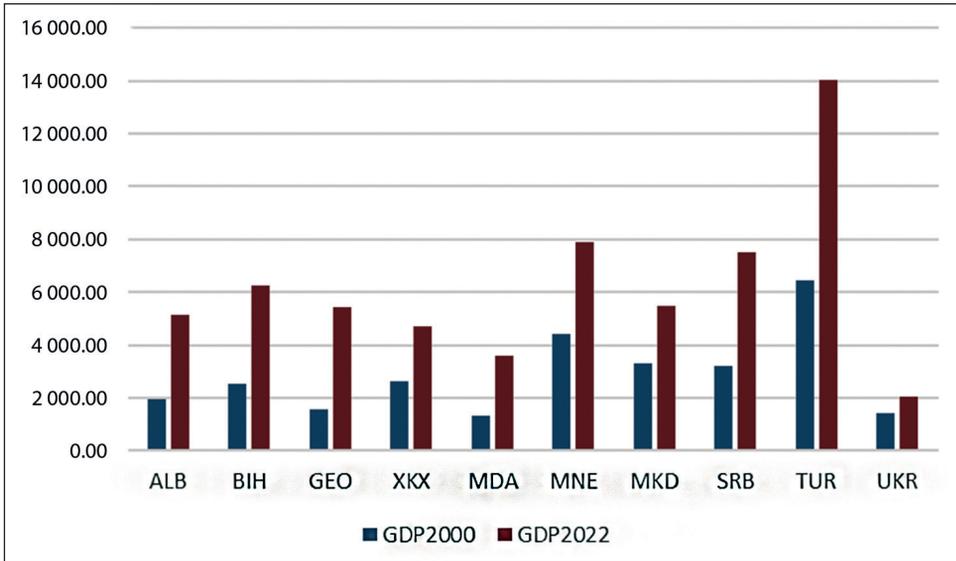


Figure 4: GDP per capita in 2000 and 2022 in candidate countries (constant 2015 US\$)

Source: WDI 2023.

Convergence within a group of countries can be examined more objectively as follows. We take a time period, which in this case is between 2000 and 2022. We take the GDP per capita in the year 2000 (the initial year), we put this variable on the horizontal axis. Using the geometric mean formula, we calculate an average growth rate for the entire period. This variable will be placed on the vertical axis. If there is convergence within the country group, it means that a negative relationship can be observed between the initial GDP per capita and the growth rate. The following figure (Figure 5) shows that there is some convergence between the newly joined countries; those countries that started from a lower level were able to grow faster. This relationship is not so clear in the case of candidate countries. Therefore, in a separate figure, let us look at the issue of convergence only for the candidate countries.

If we only focus on candidate countries, the horizontal axis can be spread more apart, so that the differences between the candidate countries are more visible (see Figure 6). So it can be seen that the initial income of Turkey is much higher than that of the other candidate countries. Among these countries, Turkey grew almost at the fastest rate, the other countries did not manage to catch up with Turkey.



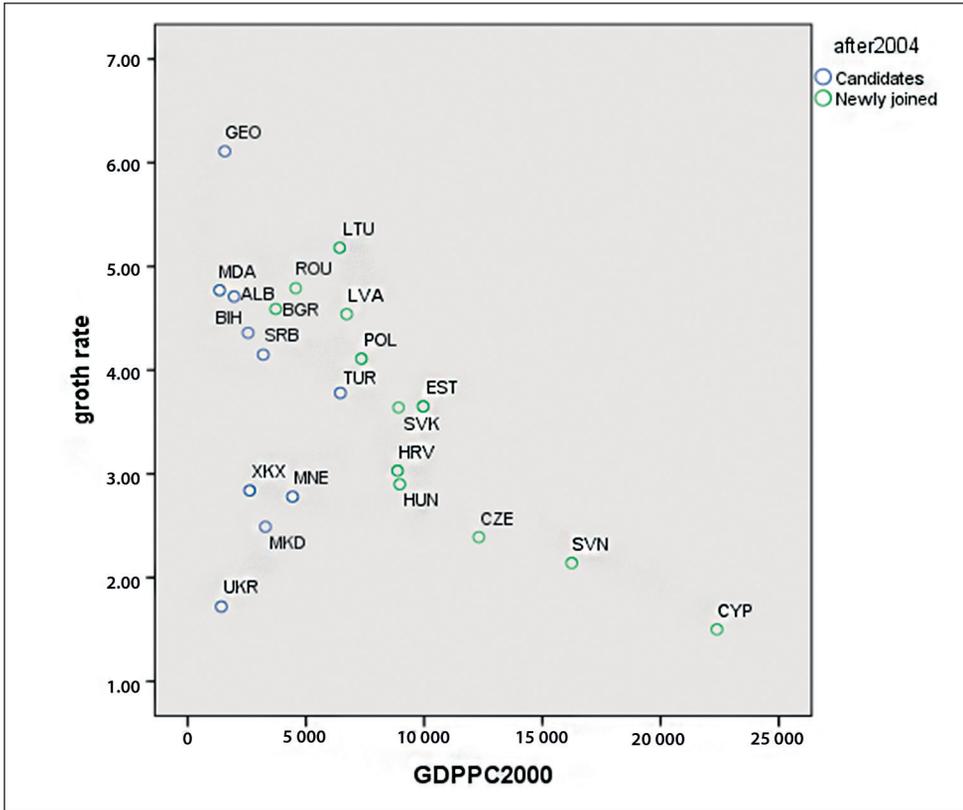


Figure 5: Convergence between candidate and newly joined countries

Source: WDI 2023.

The outlier country in the other direction is Ukraine, which was already the poorest in 2000 and managed to achieve the slowest growth rate in the examined period. Ukraine therefore lags behind the candidate countries in this respect as well, as it is struggling with fundamental problems.

Georgia also started from a very low level, but among these countries, it has been able to grow the fastest, so it was able to catch up with some of the candidate countries. With this high growth rate, Georgia was able to overtake Moldova, North Macedonia and Albania. The second richest country is Montenegro, which has a lower-than-average growth rate and was able to maintain its relative position. Serbia started at a lower level than North Macedonia, but with a higher growth rate, it was able to overtake it and catch up very closely with Montenegro.



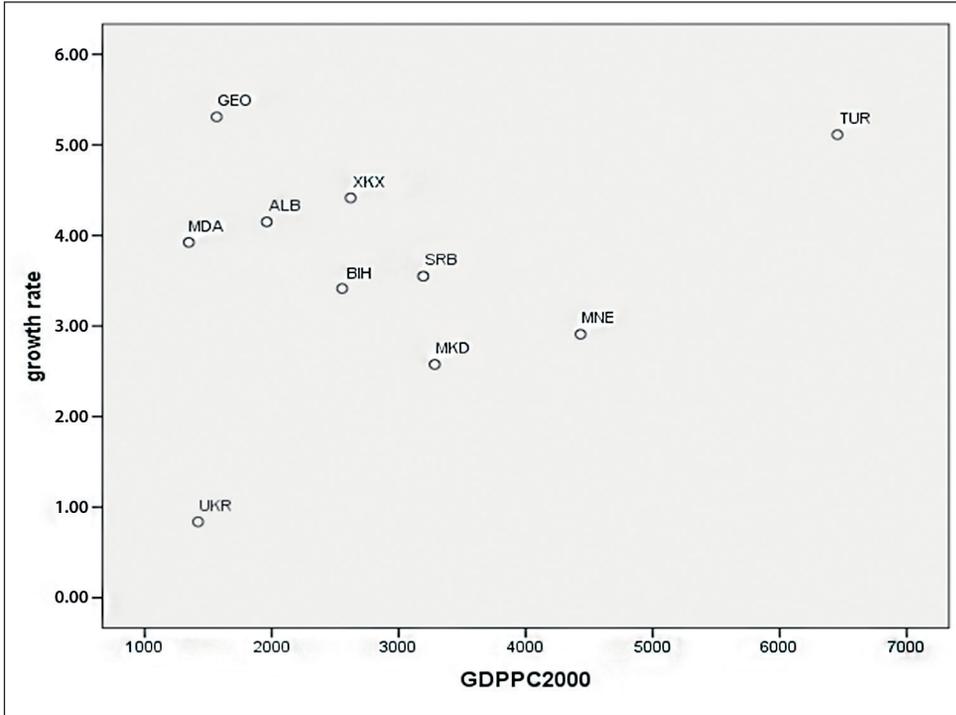


Figure 6: Convergence between only candidate countries

Source: WDI 2023.

The following figure (Figure 7) contains the GDP per capita time series. With the help of this graph, we can compare the economic growth of the newly joined and candidate countries in the last two decades. There is not much convergence visible between the two groups. The examined EU members were already more developed, and the candidates, apart from a few exceptions, were not really able to achieve greater growth. It can also be observed in detail that Ukraine is not a poor country because of the war, even in 2000 its per capita income was very low, and it was characterised by uniformly low growth. It is not that the 2022 data is an outlier, it was low throughout the examined period.



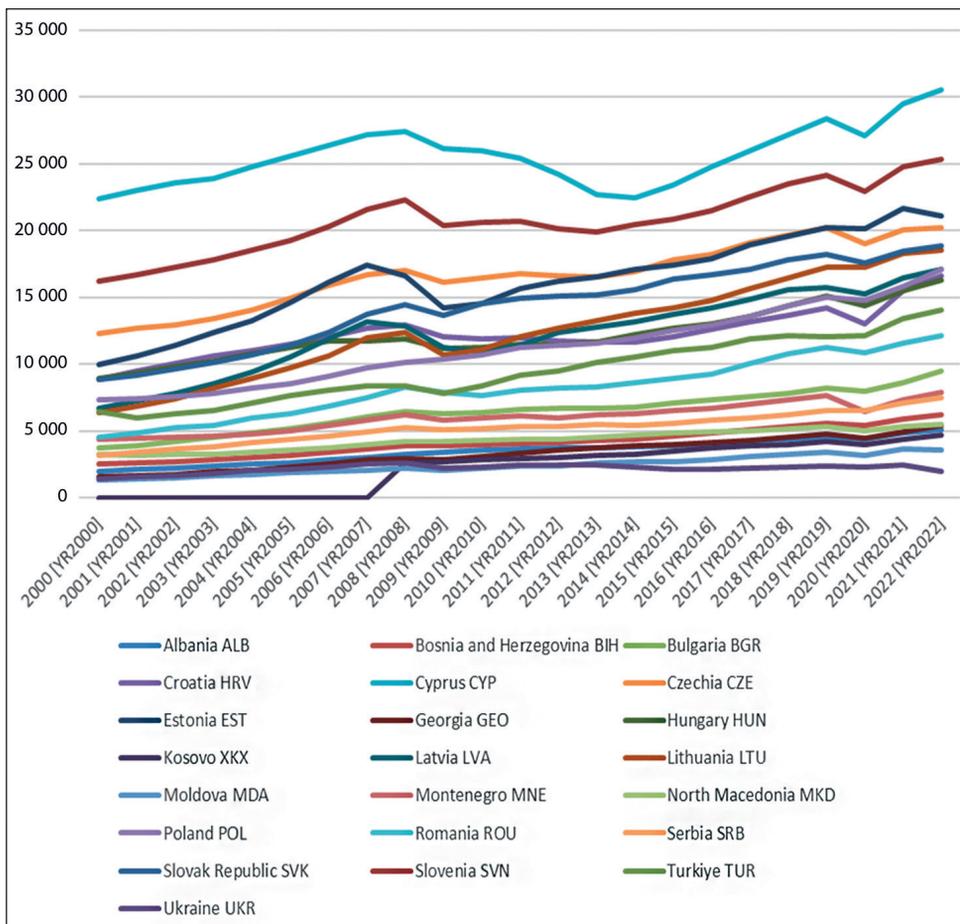


Figure 7: Convergence between candidate and newly joined countries (time series on GDP per capita between 2000 and 2022 on constant 2015 US\$)

Source: WDI 2023.

Conclusion and further thoughts

In our article, we examined how the conditions and criteria necessary for joining the EU developed and changed numerically in the ten candidate and potential candidate countries, namely Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine. We analysed these countries from the point of view of how well they fulfil the Copenhagen and other criteria necessary for joining the EU. The examined indicators do not seem to matter much



in accession decisions. These results are consistent with the theory of realism from the field of international relations and intergovernmentalism from the theories of European integration.⁴⁵

Realists argue that states act in pursuit of their self-interest, struggle for power and are concerned with their security.⁴⁶ They believe that the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no higher authority to enforce rules, and states must rely on their capabilities to ensure their survival and protect their interests.⁴⁷ The representatives of the intergovernmentalism approach, who drew heavily on realist assumptions about the role of the governments of the states, criticised the neofunctionalists⁴⁸ who predicted that further integration was inevitable and assumed that the Western European economies would expand indefinitely.⁴⁹ According to these theorists, the role of power and state sovereignty shape the behaviour of states, even in case of the enlargement process of the European Union.

From our analysis, it is visible that Ukraine's economic performance and economic growth over the past two decades are extremely weak. Moreover, it performs very, very poorly in the areas of democracy, rule of law and political stability. Nevertheless, the decision-makers of the Union have the intention of Ukraine becoming an EU member in the future. Turkey's economic development practically reaches the level of the newly joined countries, it has experienced rapid economic growth in recent years. However, it leaves a lot to be desired in terms of rule of law criteria and political stability. Although the latter is less objective, Turkey had to and still has to wait a long time for accession because of the objection of some countries.⁵⁰ Georgia has grown persistently in the last two decades, the country performed very well based on the rule of law and democracy criteria, and the only serious drawback is the lack of political stability. Georgia's membership candidate status is the most recent of the ten candidates, we are curious to see how quickly the negotiations will bring results. Montenegro and Serbia have come close to Bulgaria, the poorest EU member in terms of economic performance, they are obviously better than the other Western Balkan countries, but in terms of corruption and political stability, they are unfortunately on the same level. This can extend the accession process.

⁴⁵ A comprehensive summary of the theory of realism, the most important theoreticians and typology can be read in ELMAN–JENSEN 2014. For the theories of European integration see BULMER et al. 2020: 5–23.

⁴⁶ See MORGENTHAU 2014 [1985]: 53–59; CARR 2014 [1964]: 35–38.

⁴⁷ WALTZ 2014 [1979]: 103–123.

⁴⁸ Neofunctionalism is another explanatory theory of the European integration. The theoretical foundations are very diverse (HOOGHE–MARKS 2019: 1113–1133). It is greatly impacted by two ideas that were popular in the years immediately following World War II: pluralism and functionalism. Drawing inspiration from democratic pluralism, “neofunctionalism developed the idea that government could be disaggregated into its component group actors. Instead of making assumptions about the interests of states, as classical realists had done, neofunctionalists conceptualize the state as an arena in which societal actors operate to realize their interests” (HOOGHE–MARKS 2019: 1114).

⁴⁹ HOFFMANN 1966: 862–915.

⁵⁰ TURHAN 2016: 463–477.



We are aware that we are only in the very first step of assessing the integration maturity of the ten candidate and potential candidate countries, but as a route to further research, we could collect some important comments. In the 1950s, when there was still the European Coal and Steel Community, no rule of law criteria were examined at all; joining the EU in the 1970s was based on very soft objective rules. Today, the Copenhagen criteria, which mainly include the rule of law, democratic values, and economic and political stability, play a major role in the accession conditions.

We can view the EU enlargement process rather as a game theory problem, decision makers will engage in “the exchange (the deal)” if it is mutually beneficial for them. New countries are admitted to the EU when there is a win-win situation.⁵¹ They will expand the European Union if it coincides with the interests of the community. During the decade of the 2010s, the question was whether the decision-makers really had the interests of the entire community in mind. As realists⁵² suggest, interests are more important than rules in international relations. These interests are none other than market expansion, cheap labour and the reduction of transaction costs. The problem is that the Copenhagen criteria are difficult to grasp and measure, so compliance is difficult to account for.

In the current geostrategic environment, the enlargement of the EU and NATO is based on very similar considerations. Although there are also objective aspects each time a case-by-case (discretionary) decision is made based on the short- and long-term interests of the community. This means that political decision-makers weigh the advantages and disadvantages and decide on a case-by-case basis. We can see that currently, there are political efforts to expand the European Union to 36 members,⁵³ but the disadvantage (or risk) of this is that even the current 27 countries cannot make a unanimous decision on many questions. According to Kydland and Prescott (1982), if decision-making is based on rules, it provides a more favourable outcome in the long run due to stability and transparency. When politicians make decisions discretionally, it can undermine trust, which Kydland and Prescott (1982) call dynamic inconsistency. According to them, ad hoc decisions are therefore suboptimal in a long-run perspective.

The accession process can be viewed from a security perspective also. According to Aronin (2023), there are three different phases of the post-Cold War expansions of the EU. These are based mainly on the relationship with the external security guarantor NATO because security becomes more and more important creating a stable base for economic performance and helping to maintain the EU's most essential values. Now it seems that in times of war, it is important for the EU to be able to expand and have greater military potential, and to represent a larger share in the world economy.

⁵¹ PALÁNKAI 2010: 9–23.

⁵² MORGENTHAU 2014 [1985]: 53–59; CARR 2014 [1964]: 35–38; WALTZ 2014 [1979]: 103–123.

⁵³ See BECKER 2023.



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