

Next Commissioner for Enlargement: Which criteria should inform the selection?

Berta López Domènech

INTRODUCTION

With war raging on European soil, the European Union (EU) needs competent leadership – ready and willing to tackle head-on the polycrisis and polytransition¹ confronting the Union and its member states.

Shortly after the European elections in June, EU leaders elected António Costa as President of the European Council, confirmed Ursula von der Leyen for a second term as President of the Commission and nominated Katja Kallas as the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The Parliament endorsed the appointments in mid-July, when it supported Roberta Metsola to continue as President of the European Parliament. The whole composition of the College of Commissioners, to be presented in September, will be the result of a complex balancing act between *inter alia* political affiliation, geography and gender.

been included in the Council's 2024 – 2029 strategic agenda² and von der Leyen's political guidelines for the next European Commission.³ Hence, enlargement will be one of the most politically 'heavy' dossiers in the upcoming politico-institutional cycle. Therefore, the choice of the European Commissioner in charge of this dossier is of utmost importance.

The successful candidate will have to meet four key and interconnected criteria: (1) commitment to EU democratic values, (2) support for enlargement, (3) capacity to forge consensus among member states and candidates, and (4) trustworthiness in the eyes of all relevant stakeholders. Without this combination of credentials, it is difficult to imagine how the next Commissioner for Enlargement will translate into practice the member states' current discourse about the geopolitical imperative of delivering a wider and more secure Union of 30+ countries.

Enlargement will be one of the most politically 'heavy' dossiers in the upcoming politico-institutional cycle. Therefore, the choice of the European Commissioner in charge of this dossier is of utmost importance.

The current geopolitical situation resulting from Russia's war in Ukraine has pushed EU enlargement to the top of the Union's priorities. Widening the EU has

BACKGROUND

A controversial outgoing Commissioner for Enlargement

In 2019, when von der Leyen became Commission President for the first time and set about to form her Cabinet, enlargement policy was not among the EU's key priorities. The portfolio was thus handed to Hungary, which was interested in the post to increase its influence and soft power in the Western Balkans. The European Parliament rejected Viktor Orbán's first appointee for the job, László Trócsányi, on account of a conflict of interest.⁴ But Oliver Várhelyi, Orbán's second nominee, who, until then, had been Ambassador to the EU, passed the EP's probing and became Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement. The outcome was seen

as a concession to Orbán to keep him close to Brussels and potentially deter his home-grown illiberal pursuits. Orbán, a vocal advocate of the fast-track accession of the Balkan region, celebrated the appointment as Hungary's "biggest diplomatic success of the past ten years."⁵

The decision to give the enlargement dossier to Hungary was also welcomed by authorities in Serbia and Republika Srpska, both with questionable democratic credentials and close ties to the Russian President, Vladimir Putin. Conversely, civil society in the Balkans and the EU were prompt to caution at that time that a commissioner nominated by a government which systematically erodes the rule of law domestically was not best placed to promote democracy in the candidate countries and not the most suitable choice for the post.⁶

Biased support for EU aspirants

As Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, Oliver Várhelyi has been very supportive of EU enlargement towards the Balkans. Yet, his endorsement has often been criticised for seeking to circumvent democratic conditions in the process of advancing the region's EU integration. He is said to have tried to water down the rule of law and human rights conditions set on the aspirants, condoning autocratic behaviours of Balkan leaders.⁷ Despite Serbia's serious democratic and rule of law shortcomings,⁸ Várhelyi was particularly favourable to Belgrade's EU membership aspiration and worked during his mandate to strengthen ties with the Bosnian Serb secessionist leader Milorad Dodik.⁹ In fact, in 2022, the European Parliament, as well as individual political groups and MEPs, called for an investigation into Várhelyi's decisions as Commissioner to determine whether he had breached any obligations affixed to his role.¹⁰

However, Hungary's support for the EU accession of the Balkan countries sits in stark contrast with the country's reluctance to endorse Ukraine's EU membership bid. In December 2023, Viktor Orbán tried to postpone the start of accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova,¹¹ and blocked the €50-billion Ukraine Facility for two months, until an extraordinary Council Summit on 1 February this year eventually released the money.¹²

Orbán's unwillingness to cooperate at the European level with regards to Ukraine could be linked to his special relationship with Putin.

Orbán has repeatedly justified his hesitation about Ukraine's European perspective by reference to the country's failure to meet Brussels-set conditions, the threat that its huge agricultural sector would pose to

EU farmers, and concerns linked to the mistreatment of the Hungarian minority on Ukraine's territory.¹³ But Orbán's unwillingness to cooperate at the European level with regards to Ukraine could be linked to his special relationship with Putin.

The Hungarian Prime Minister has emerged as the Kremlin's ally in the EU. Orbán has been the only European leader to meet Putin since April 2022, shortly after Russia launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February. The two met first in autumn 2023 in Beijing and then in early July 2024 in Moscow. The latter encounter was part of a trip that Orbán undertook after taking over the EU Council Presidency. On his way, Orbán stopped in Ukraine and Beijing, in what he described as a "peace mission", arguing that Hungary is "the only country in Europe that can speak to everyone."¹⁴ The trip attracted a lot of criticism in the EU, which the Commission responded to by asking Commissioners not to attend the informal ministers' meetings during the Hungarian Presidency and announcing that it would send lower-ranking civil servants instead.¹⁵

Enlargement in the spotlight

However, the choice of the new Commissioner for Enlargement comes not only against the backdrop of a rather negative experience with the predecessor; it also happens at a time when enlargement policy has assumed priority status, after many years in which it struggled for political attention.

The war in Ukraine reshuffled the EU's list of priorities, and enlargement climbed quickly to the top of the EU's agenda as a geopolitical tool to strengthen the continent's security architecture.

The war in Ukraine reshuffled the EU's list of priorities, and enlargement climbed quickly to the top of the EU's agenda as a geopolitical tool to strengthen the continent's security architecture. Member states swiftly granted candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022. Two years later, in June 2024, Kyiv and Chisinau managed to officially open accession negotiations with the EU. In December 2023, candidate status was awarded to Georgia. Still, the country's authoritarian turn, with the recent adoption of the so-called 'foreign agent' law,¹⁶ has now poured cold water on its European aspirations.

After a decade of stalemate, the EU has attempted to revitalise its enlargement process towards the Balkans, endorsing the idea of the region's gradual integration. In July 2022, it kick-started accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. In March 2024, it greenlighted the opening of negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In January 2024, it held the 15th Intergovernmental Conference with Montenegro, and it finally removed visa requirements for Kosovo.

STATE OF PLAY

The Kremlin's economic interests and political interference in the Balkans and Eastern Europe existed before 2022, but Russia's aggression exposed the high security risks that such meddling posed for the Union. With the new geopolitical reality, enlargement is now exercised again as a geopolitical tool to anchor peace and security of the continent.

Unlike a decade ago, when the former President of the Commission Jean Claude Juncker decided to "take a break from enlargement" during his mandate to consolidate the EU28, there is currently rhetorical consensus at the EU level on the need to enlarge the Union. However, the reality is more complex and, behind closed doors, not everyone is convinced that the EU should expand. The Union and the candidates alike face substantial challenges to deliver on the enlargement dossier.

The candidate's challenge: An ambitious reform agenda

Democratic backsliding across the Balkans has, in time, distanced the region from the EU, allowing member states to justify the slow pace or stagnation in the process. Over the past years, aspirants have made little progress in meeting EU democratic standards or catching up economically with the member states, according to the Commission's yearly assessment of the candidate's preparedness in each policy area. In the same vein, bilateral disputes and unresolved statehood issues have further exposed the transformative limits of enlargement and dented its merit-based logic in the Balkans.

These challenges, i.e. democratic backsliding, open border and statehood disputes, and poor economic convergence, will need to be addressed if EU accession is to materialise. But after more than 20 years of integration, it remains unclear whether the EU has the right tools to help the Balkans make progress on all those fronts, and whether the region still has the political will and stamina to reform in line with the conditions set.

From this perspective, the ability of the three new Eastern candidates to advance within two years to the point of opening accession talks with the EU – when it took more than a decade for some of the Balkan aspirants to achieve the same feat – was met with perplexity in the region. The Union's strong and prompt endorsement of the trio's membership bid fostered the impression in the Balkans that the EU favoured the Eastern candidates.¹⁷

This perception has been feeding an already widespread public sentiment of distrust and even cynicism in the Balkans about the sincerity of the EU's membership promise to the region. In fact, while most citizens in the

region are in favour of joining the EU – with the highest levels of support in Albania (92%) and the lowest in Serbia with (40%) – they find it increasingly difficult to take the European perspective at face value. While in Kosovo, 62% of the citizens trust the EU's offer, this number drops to 30% in the case of Serbia and 34% in North Macedonia.¹⁸

For their part, while public enthusiasm for EU integration is still widespread,¹⁹ the Eastern candidates still need to double down on their efforts to implement the required reforms. In the case of Ukraine, delivery must happen at the same time as the country is fighting a war on its territory. The unilateral blockades by individual member states, particularly Hungary, might hurdle Ukraine's path towards the EU. However, unlike their Balkan counterparts, the Eastern aspirants still enjoy high levels of sympathy from both EU citizens and political leaders.²⁰

The EU's challenge: Beyond rhetorical consensus

Regarding the Union, among the member states there is yet no shared strategic vision on 'how' and 'when' to proceed with enlargement. Nor are the EU capitals in agreement about the necessary internal reforms to ensure that a potentially much larger Union remains functional. While the accession of many new members, including big countries like Ukraine, will impact European decision-making, the institutional architecture, and the budget, there seems to be hardly any internal appetite to discuss or undertake adjustments – especially if they involve Treaty change.

Furthermore, the electoral success of populist forces – that advocate, as shown in the latest European elections, for changing the EU in the direction of returning competences at the national level – makes an ambitious and comprehensive EU reform process rather unlikely at present. In the June EP vote, the far-right performed especially well in France and Germany, the two countries that have long driven forward the debate about the future of the Union. In fact, last year, these countries' governments commissioned a report²¹ on EU internal reforms that would prepare the Union for enlargement. Therefore, the weakening of the pro-EU forces in Paris and Berlin likely means that the integration engine will lose steam in the foreseeable future.²²

In the June EP vote, the far-right performed especially well in France and Germany, the two countries that have long driven forward the debate about the future of the Union.

The Council's Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 adopted in June this year explicitly links enlargement and EU internal reform. But there are huge divergences among member states on what these changes should be. Some actors support Treaty change while others, especially in the Council, consider the current EU legal framework to be 'enlargement proof'.²³ Over the past months, more voices have been pushing, for example, to move from unanimity to qualified majority voting (QMV) in the intermediate steps of the accession process as a way to prevent unilateral blockades in the process. In January 2024, Germany and Slovenia presented a non-paper in the General Affairs Council proposing QMV on opening clusters.²⁴ Yet, smaller member states, such as Central and Eastern Europe, remain reluctant to give up their veto rights by backing this idea.

PROSPECTS

The outcome of the recent European elections shifted the EU's ideological map rightward. While centrist forces still hold a majority in the Parliament, the new composition of the European Assembly will allow the EPP to look at its rights if consensus is lacking at the centre. This potential realignment in terms of coalitions poses a serious challenge to European democracy and could have implications for the overall direction of certain dossiers, including enlargement.

The potential realignment in terms of coalitions poses a serious challenge to European democracy and could have implications for the overall direction of certain dossiers, including enlargement.

The rise of illiberal forces in the EU is likely to undermine the EU's authority to push for higher democratic standards in candidate countries and disincentivise the implementation of rule of law reforms in the Balkan countries, already experiencing different levels of state capture.

While the next Commissioner for Enlargement might be upgraded to the Vice-President level to account for the greater political relevance of the portfolio,²⁵ it is still unclear whether enlargement and neighbourhood policies will continue to be bundled together or whether there will be a commissioner responsible for each of them. The latter option is preferable because it would allow the Commissioner for Enlargement to have a stronger focus on the countries that are aspiring to join the EU, while someone else could effectively deal with the Eastern and Southern flank of the Mediterranean, where the Union is particularly concerned with security and migration issues.

Hungary has shown interest in keeping the post, and Orbán has nominated Oliver Várhelyi for a second term as commissioner.²⁶ However, it is highly unlikely that EU leaders will want to have again a nominee from Budapest managing this critical dossier after the previous controversial performance of Várhelyi and given Hungary's wavering stance on Ukraine.

Other member states have also shown interest in the portfolio, including Poland, Austria, Sweden, and Greece. The next Commissioner for Enlargement should come from a country that does not have ongoing or past bilateral disputes with candidate countries to avoid the possibility of unconstructive biases bearing on his/her engagement with the aspirants. In this sense, the Greek nominee is probably not the best option; as Greece has kept North Macedonia's membership bid in limbo for years, and history seems to repeat itself – now regarding Albania.²⁷

As for Austria and Poland, both have traditionally supported enlargement for historic and geographic reasons. However, Vienna's strong push for speeding up the accession of the Western Balkans²⁸ and Warsaw's tensions with Kyiv over imports of agricultural products²⁹ (despite its long-standing strategic focus and interest in seeing the Eastern countries advance towards the EU) could raise suspicions about their impartiality.

Moreover, to restore the credibility of the process and successfully deliver on the dossier, the profile of the next candidate should also insist on the following interconnected four criteria: (1) commitment to EU democratic values, (2) support for enlargement, (3) capacity to forge consensus among member states and candidates, and (4) trustworthiness in the eyes of all relevant stakeholders.

(1) Commitment to EU democratic values

As the main interlocutor of EU aspirants, responsible for pushing for reforms, the Enlargement Commissioner must lead by example. S/he must have a flawless rule of law track record and unquestionable commitment to EU democratic values – just like his/her own country. Hence, the position cannot be filled by the national of a country that is considered an electoral autocracy³⁰ and is under EU scrutiny for the erosion of the rule of law domestically, as was the case in the previous politico-institutional cycle.

This is an important pre-requisite for the commissioner to muster the authority to push for necessary reforms. S/he should be seen as an ally of the pro-reform, pro-EU actors and civil society in the aspirant countries. Illiberal and authoritarian leaders and governments among the candidates should not feel encouraged to look at the next commissioner as their 'buddy' with whom they can negotiate conditions or cut corners.

But placing a high premium on integrity when choosing the next Commissioner for Enlargement is also crucial to reassure member states and other EU stakeholders that the rule of law remains a cornerstone of the membership conditionality and that any new entrants will be ready on that front. Doing so would help to assuage concerns that

further EU widening could have a negative impact on the Union's democratic functioning.

(2) Support for enlargement

The successful candidate must be pro-enlargement and convinced of the need and urgency to enlarge the EU both towards the East and South-East of Europe. The new commissioner must push for the accession of all aspirants before public and political enthusiasm in the EU starts to fade away – a likely scenario if the war in Ukraine drags on and if other concerns, such as economic ones, become more salient to European citizens. The Eastern and Balkan enlargement tracks should advance in tandem and according to the same criteria to avoid fostering the perception that one region – or one country – is privileged over another.

The next Commissioner must also be loyal to the general EU's interests and stick to the agreed strategic decisions, averting any suspicion that s/he follows instead of the agenda of their home government. This is particularly important in a context where commissioners have a very high profile and strong domestic links – which makes them vulnerable to political influence. This will be key to making sure that the EU speaks with a single voice with the candidates. In turn, doing so could help to restore the credibility of the EU's membership promise.

In addition, given that supporting Ukraine will continue to be one of the main political priorities for the new EU leadership, the Commissioner for Enlargement should not be a nominee of a government that has – or is suspected of having – close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin or interests linked to Russia.

(3) Capacity to forge consensus among member states and candidates

The next Commissioner for Enlargement needs a strong leadership profile to steer the EU towards delivering on enlargement. S/he will have to reconcile the positions of different EU institutions and member states and help them reach consensus on 'how' and 'when' to advance the dossier – a decision directly linked to the question of EU internal reform.

To this end, the successful candidate should have a good grasp of the technical and political aspects of the enlargement process and be familiar with the interests, positions, and concerns of different EU stakeholders – as well as the sociopolitical realities on the ground in the candidate countries. In the fall, the members of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) responsible for validating the candidate must prompt s/he on all those issues.

The next commissioner should ensure that all European institutions and member states are on board with the ensuing roadmap for EU expansion and approach enlargement as a cross-cutting topic. The Directorate General responsible for Enlargement must continue to coordinate the process but other Commission Directorates-General (DGs) should become responsible

for specific policy aspects, especially those that require more technical or specific expertise, like agriculture, fisheries, cohesion, circular economy, cohesion or climate. This is important given that the candidates' preparations encompass the thematic scope of all DGs and that any new accession has an impact on policies under the competence of different DGs.

(4) Trustworthy in the eyes of relevant stakeholders

To bring enlargement back on track and practice discourse about the geopolitical imperative of delivering on the dossier, the new commissioner should focus on restoring the credibility of the process.

To that end, s/he should build a relationship of mutual trust with the different stakeholders in the candidates and the EU, particularly the member states, as their consent remains indispensable for aspirants to move forward. Bidirectional exchanges of views and opinions at the different stages of the process are essential to building mutual confidence and making sure that both sides understand the positions and decisions of the other.

While EU institutions and member states need guarantees that candidates are credibly reforming, at the same time, candidates need certainty that when they meet the criteria set, they will be allowed to advance and join the EU, as agreed. The commissioner should be recognised as an honest broker who has the authority to push the EU and candidates to deliver on their respective commitments.

Enlarging the EU is as much a response to the current geopolitical dilemmas as it is a test for the Union and its member states.

The EU faces huge internal and external challenges in this new era. Enlarging the EU is as much a response to the current geopolitical dilemmas as it is a test for the Union and its member states to prove that they can deliver on the dossier and be a global actor. The choice of the next Commissioner for Enlargement matters in this regard because it could help to tilt the balance in the direction of success or failure. The President of the Commission Ursula von der Leyen should not repeat past mistakes when assigning this post. And the European Parliament should not cut any slack to the nominee, making sure that s/he can rise to the occasion at this critical juncture for the future of the continent.

The support the European Policy Centre receives for its ongoing operations, or specifically for its publications, does not constitute an endorsement of their contents, which reflect the views of the authors only. Supporters and partners cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.

- ¹ Janis A. Emmanouilidis Fabian Zuleeg, "[Eight structural innovations for the EU's next politico-institutional cycle](#)", *European Policy Centre*, 24 June 2024.
- ² European Council, "[Strategic agenda 2024-2029](#)", 10 July 2024.
- ³ Ursula von der Leyen, "[Europe's choice: political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029](#)", 18 July 2024.
- ⁴ Jennifer Rankin, "[MEPs reject two EU commissioner candidates](#)", *The Guardian*, 26 September 2019.
- ⁵ Euractiv & AFP, "[Orban says Hungary to increase its EU influence with the enlargement portfolio](#)", 22 November 2019.
- ⁶ Florian Bieber, "[Do Not Leave EU Enlargement in Orban's Hands](#)", *Balkan Insight*, 2 October 2019.
- ⁷ Zosia Wanat & Lili Bayer, "[Olívér Várhelyi: Europe's under-fire gatekeeper](#)", *Politico*, 5 October 2021.
- ⁸ Maarten Lemstra, "[The destructive effects of state capture in the Western Balkans EU enlargement undermined](#)", *Clingendael*, September 2020.
- ⁹ Keno Verseck, <https://www.dw.com/en/oliver-varhelyi-pursues-viktor-orbans-agenda-in-brussels/a-62083275>, *DW*, 6 October 2022.
- ¹⁰ Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament, "[REPORT on the implementation of the common foreign and security policy – annual report 2022](#)", 9 December 2022.
- ¹¹ Milan Nič & Frauke Seebass, "[Will Deadlock over Ukraine Kill the EU Enlargement Momentum?](#)", *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, 13 December 2023.
- ¹² Jorge Liboreiro, "[EU leaders approve €50 billion deal for Ukraine after Viktor Orbán lifts his veto](#)", *Euronews*, 1 February 2024.
- ¹³ Nick Thorpe, "[Eyes on Hungary's Orban as EU leaders decide on support for Ukraine](#)", *BBC*, 14 December 2023.
- ¹⁴ Euronews, "[Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán makes surprise China visit after trip to Russia](#)", 8 July 2024.
- ¹⁵ Barbara Moens & Pieter Haeck, "[Commissioners should skip Hungary's meetings, European Commission says](#)", *Politico*, 15 July 2024.
- ¹⁶ Gabriel Gavin & Dato Parulava, "[Georgia's EU dream in tatters as 'foreign agent' bill becomes law](#)", *Politico*, 28 May 2024.
- ¹⁷ Financial Times, "[Balkans' frustration mounts over Ukraine's fast-track to EU membership](#)", 17 September 2023.
- ¹⁸ European Western Balkans, "[IRI poll: Most Western Balkan countries support EU membership, but many citizens are sceptical of EU's seriousness](#)", 16 May 2024.
- ¹⁹ Ukrainska Pravda, "[Nearly 80% of Ukrainians endorse EU and NATO membership, poll finds](#)", 29 November 2023.
- ²⁰ Sergio Cantone, "[Majority of EU voters in favour of Ukraine joining the EU, exclusive IPSOS/Euronews poll finds](#)", *Euronews*, 4 April 2024.
- ²¹ Olivier Costa & Daniela Schwarzer (Rapporteurs), "[Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st century](#)", 18 September 2023.
- ²² Fabian Zuleeg, "[This is not a time to underestimate the challenges to come – 2024 EU elections results: Limited change, great challenges](#)", *European Policy Centre*, 12 June 2024.
- ²³ European Commission, "[Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews](#)", 20 March 2024.
- ²⁴ Wouter Zweers, Isabelle Ioannides, Zoran Nechev & Nikola Dimitrov, "[Unblocking decision-making in EU enlargement - Qualified Majority Voting as a way forward?](#)", *Clingendael*, 19 June 2024.
- ²⁵ Alexandra Brzozowski, "[Why the next European Commission's enlargement portfolio could be its most wanted](#)", *Euractiv*, 4 June 2024.
- ²⁶ Jorge Liboreiro, "[Orbán nominates Oliver Várhelyi for EU Commissioner despite past controversies](#)", *Euronews*, 29 July 2024.
- ²⁷ Gjergj Erebara, "[Albania Upholds Ethnic Greek Mayor-Elect's Vote-Buying Conviction](#)", *Balkan Insight*, 25 June 2024.
- ²⁸ Oliver Noyan, "[Austria pushes to speed up EU accession for Western Balkans, especially Bosnia](#)", *Euractiv*, 5 December 2023.
- ²⁹ Emma Dodd & Caitlin Welsh, "[Fracturing Solidarity: The Grain Trade Dispute between Ukraine and the European Union](#)", *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, 20 February 2024.
- ³⁰ V-Dem Institute, "[Democracy Report 2023: Defiance in the Face of Autocratization](#)", March 2023.

With the strategic
support of



King Baudouin
Foundation

Working together for a better society



Co-funded by
the European Union