

HARD SECURITY, HYBRID THREATS, AND THE EU'S CREDIBILITY IN THE CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

The [Trans European Policy Studies Association \(TEPSA\)](#), in cooperation with [Carnegie Europe](#), has co-organised the second meeting of the **Expert Hub on EU Enlargement**.

Date: Monday, 1 June

Time: 10:00-12:00 (networking coffee as of 9:30)

Location: Carnegie Europe - Rue du Congrès 15, 1000 Bruxelles

The meeting will be held under the Chatham House Rule

ABOUT THE EXPERT HUB ON EU ENLARGEMENT

The InvigoratEU Expert Hub gathers an exclusive group of distinguished EU and national policymakers and civil servants from the European Commission, EEAS, European Parliament, Council Secretariat, Permanent Representations and current/upcoming Presidencies of the Council of the EU, who work on EU enlargement and related issues.

It is created in the framework of the Horizon Europe project [InvigoratEU – “Invigorating Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy for A Resilient Europe”](#), which sets out to explore how the EU can invigorate its enlargement and neighbourhood policy to enhance Europe's resilience.

Between 2024 to 2026, TEPSA is organising a series of closed-door discussions to bring together Expert Hub members and researchers from the InvigoratEU project. These meetings provide a forum for a structured dialogue about key research findings and policy advice on EU enlargement. Selected members of the Expert Hub are invited to each meeting based on their specific expertise and its relevance to the topics discussed and can provide feedback and insights into the research process.

FORMAT AND LOGISTICS

The fifth Expert Hub meeting will take place on **Monday 1 June 2026**. The event will start at **9:30** with a networking coffee, followed by a roundtable discussion from 10:00 to 12:00. The meeting is hosted at Carnegie Europe, located at Rue du Congrès 15, 1000 Brussels.

As a distinguished member of the Expert Hub on EU Enlargement, we believe your knowledge will greatly enrich the discussion and provide our experts with valuable input into their research. The meeting will take the form of a roundtable discussion, featuring concise and focused insights from our consortium's researchers, followed by an open group discussion. Such a format will allow for transparent exchanges to address long-standing challenges with fresh perspectives. We are looking for active and policy-oriented discussions based on evidence-based research. The meeting is strictly upon invitation and will take place under the Chatham House Rule.

CONTENT AND OBJECTIVES

Russia does not need to be overwhelmingly strong to gain ground in the EU's neighbourhood. It only needs the EU to leave enough empty space with delayed promises, blurred timelines, half-open doors, and societies slowly losing faith that the EU means what it says.

In the Western Balkans, wherever EU conditionality has lost credibility, **Russian disinformation fills the information space, pro-Kremlin political forces and hybrid interference gain ground.** In the Eastern neighbourhood, Russia spent years exploiting the EU's ambiguity, its reluctance to name the aggressor, its insistence on "restraint," its exclusion of defence cooperation from the Eastern Partnership. February 2022 made this ambiguity untenable. Nevertheless, even now, with the EU starting to reinvent itself as a security actor at historic speed, **the hesitation has not vanished.** It is precisely in this limbo that **Russian conventional and hybrid threats continue to operate most effectively.**

This meeting brings together two InvigoratEU researchers whose work explore the following question:

How is Russia exploiting the gaps created by EU incoherence in the enlargement process, through conventional and hybrid threats to candidate countries, and what are actionable steps that the EU should take in response?

Tyine Karjalainen (Research Fellow, Finnish Institute of International Affairs) will present how the geopolitical logic that once constrained EU engagement created precisely the vulnerabilities that Russia repeatedly took advantage of. She will also address how the EU should expand its role in defence support at a time when demand for European defence solutions is increasing. **Elena Ventura** (Research Analyst, Carnegie Europe) will present new research on democracy support innovations in the candidate countries, where enlargement conditionality has been inconsistent. In this respect, increasingly sophisticated hybrid interventions have stepped in and exploited the resulting disillusionment. What are innovative approaches for reinforcing resilience against these threats?

The meeting will open with the welcoming remarks by **Prof Dr Michael Kaeding** (Professor at the University of Duisburg-Essen, Director of Studies at the College of Europe, InvigoratEU Coordinator), who will also moderate the discussion. **Prof Dr Frank Schimmelfennig** (Professor of European Politics at the Center for Comparative and International Studies at ETH Zürich) will act as a discussant, reflecting on the points raised by the speakers and drawing on his own expertise to further enrich the conversation.

The meeting will invite Expert Hub members to stress-test these findings and bring their own read of the topic. The discussion will focus on the following questions:

- The EU has found new urgency for defence, but are we witnessing a genuine transformation in how the EU performs as a security actor? How can the EU maximise the capacity building efforts in candidate countries in order to be ready to fight united as Europe?
- Innovative approaches for improving resilience are emerging but Russian hybrid operations have decades-long head start with embedded networks in the candidate countries. Where is the EU's response disrupting these dynamics structurally and where is it not?