

INVIGORATEU

CONTEST

**Already European,
still proving it:
Enlargement and
the security of
belonging**

by Sam de Vet



ESSAY: WINNING SUBMISSION

What drew me to enlargement as a security question was the mismatch between the countries involved in Europe's defence and those able to participate in decisions shaping the common response. Candidate states already cooperate with the EU on defence and help sustain infrastructure that crosses its borders, while remaining outside the EU institutions where the response to a crisis is decided. EU membership would give prepared countries a place in decisions they are already expected to support and implement, placing that cooperation on a more durable basis.

This mismatch is usually discussed as a question of accession readiness, but it also concerns the political relationship the EU establishes with countries seeking to join it. Candidates are repeatedly recognised as European and asked to organise difficult reforms and strategic choices around a shared future, even though fulfilling their commitments does not always bring the promised next step towards membership. I describe this gap between recognition as European and participation in EU decisions as a question of belonging. I argue that a wider Union can contribute to Europe's security and resilience by closing the distance between recognised belonging and institutional participation. Before membership, this requires a credible accession process that strengthens democratic accountability; afterwards, it requires political equality. Current [proposals for special safeguards in future accession treaties](#) make this question relevant on both sides of admission.

Credibility before membership

The accession process influences

European security well before membership because its basic promise is that reforms will lead to advancement. These reforms also serve candidate countries' own development, regardless of when they join. In turn, opening a group of negotiating chapters, or provisionally closing an individual chapter, gives pro-EU domestic reformers evidence that difficult changes produce results. Repeated deferral, however, weakens that argument, especially when bilateral disputes interrupt movement without clear limits. A credible accession prospect can also help governments sustain support for foreign policy alignment, including sanctions or other strategic choices with immediate domestic costs. Domestic politics and a candidate's economic or security ties to other countries also influence foreign policy choices, but an uncertain accession prospect can weaken one part of the case for alignment.

For a Minister explaining sanctions, or a mayor explaining why procurement rules must change, the distinction between a demanding process and an arbitrary one has practical consequences. Visible movement in the accession process gives them something concrete to point towards when defending immediate costs, but once that expectation has been weakened, opponents can describe the same costs as compliance with rules whose authors never intended to share power.

Belonging in the Western Balkans

[Maria Todorova's concept of Balkanism](#) helps explain why the gap between contribution and participation carries

weight in the Western Balkans. She examines portrayals of the region as Europe's nearby but incomplete interior, judged by European standards and associated with political immaturity without being accepted as equal to the centre. The accession process can reproduce this position when candidates are repeatedly called European and placed in a shared future, even as institutional recognition remains conditional and reversible. Political leaders describe this position in revealing spatial terms. Hristijan Mickoski has spoken of North Macedonia as ["still in the lobby"](#) after changing its constitutional name, and Edi Rama has described Brussels as a ["castle" in which candidates are allowed to "feel how it feels to be equal"](#) once admitted inside. Their significance lies in the position they describe, with countries expected to prepare for common European action even as the link between meeting accession conditions and gaining institutional participation remains uncertain.

Candidate leaders also negotiate this hierarchy and sometimes reproduce it: Rama defended continued support for Ukraine despite its non-recognition of Kosovo, describing Albania as the ["Europe of the Balkans"](#) and distancing it from "folk nationalists" in Tirana and Pristina. He argued that Albania was "grown enough" to support Ukraine while criticising its position on Kosovo. This language places Albania in the position of setting a European example, challenging its association with political immaturity. Yet it also retains Europeanness as a measure through which political maturity is claimed and others' conduct is judged.

The institutional side of belonging becomes clearer in the contrast

between Albania and North Macedonia. In Albania, Rama described the Commission's report as ["brutally truthful" and "amazingly inspiring"](#) in November 2025, after the country had [opened all six negotiating clusters](#). On 14 July 2026, Albania [provisionally closed its first three chapters](#). EU scrutiny can consequently be presented as productive discipline, even after [earlier years Rama described as humiliating](#).

From North Macedonia, the process looks different because two decades of candidacy have been marked by repeated blockages. The country changed its constitutional name following the Prespa Agreement with Greece, and it later accepted a negotiating framework tied to further constitutional changes concerning the Bulgarian community. [Its negotiating clusters remain unopened](#) while the country maintains close alignment with EU foreign and security policy. Blockages arising from bilateral disputes with individual Member States are particularly difficult to overcome, but even where those conditions have a theoretically defensible basis, successive demands can weaken confidence within the candidate countries that a politically costly compromise will bring visible progress.

Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski condensed this complaint into a reciprocal claim: ["We are ready. Europe can count on us. And now it is time for us to start counting on Europe."](#) The formulation presents accession readiness as a mutual obligation without establishing that every condition has been fulfilled. Candidates must demonstrate democratic and institutional reliability, with no equally visible process assessing the Union's

reliability. In that context, Foreign Minister Timčo Mucunski has [warned that uncertainty gives Russian influence room to exploit frustration](#) and depict the EU as unwilling to integrate the region. Delay does not mechanically produce hostile alignment, though repeated deferral can create a political opening in which EU conditions can gradually lose their authority in a country already tied to European defence and regional stability.

These cases leave me with a strict view of conditionality, though they also place more responsibility on the institutions administering it. Coming from the Netherlands, where enlargement scepticism often rests on concerns about the rule of law and the Union's capacity to govern itself, I regard demanding assessment as necessary. The Commission and Member States should describe stagnation honestly and distinguish legislation adopted for display from rules enforced in practice, since a wider Union gains little resilience from commitments that exist mainly on paper. Where limited administrative capacity impedes implementation, the EU shares responsibility for providing sustained support. The Commission should also invite evidence from civil society and local actors, and explain publicly how it considered that evidence when deciding whether reforms were working in practice.

Verified progress should normally produce the promised procedural step, and a Member State blocking it should explain publicly how its objection relates to the common criteria. North Macedonia's experience makes the need for that discipline clear. Minority rights and good-neighbourly relations

are legitimate concerns for the EU, and bilateral disputes are often deeply interconnected with the formal accession process. The relevance of such objections to the common criteria should therefore be assessed openly, with clear requirements for resolving objections and limits on their ability to halt accession indefinitely. Political negotiation or mediation should help resolve these disputes without allowing them to obscure the assessment of reforms against the common criteria.

Ukraine and reform under wartime conditions

Ukraine brings the relationship between enlargement and security into the far more urgent circumstances of war. Its sacrifice and strategic importance give its candidacy particular urgency, while democratisation and rule-of-law reforms remain essential to membership. Assessing those reforms should take account of the [political, institutional and administrative constraints of wartime](#), including their effects on the pace and implementation of particular changes. These constraints should inform assessment and the support provided, without treating an unmet requirement as fulfilled or allowing Ukraine's strategic importance to eclipse democratic accountability.

The events of July 2025 illustrate what this distinction means in practice. Legislation placed Ukraine's National Anti-Corruption Bureau (NABU) and Specialised Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office (SAPO) under greater control of the politically appointed Prosecutor General. Ukrainian protesters and civil society organisations challenged the changes,

while Commissioner Marta Kos publicly criticised the changes and emphasised the agencies' importance to Ukraine's EU path. Following domestic protests and international criticism, a law restoring their independence was adopted on 31 July. The Commission subsequently noted that provisions allowing certain prosecutorial appointments without competition remained.

For me, this episode shows what proactive but critical enlargement support should involve. Where war limits administrative capacity, the EU should provide sustained assistance and agree realistic implementation timetables while maintaining accession standards. When political decisions weaken independent institutions, it should identify the breach, explain the correction required and support specific civil society demands that defend agreed democratic commitments. Public criticism of such measures can accompany continued cooperation with the government.

Ukrainian citizens defending independent institutions are also shaping what their European future should mean. Taking their demands seriously connects the promise of participation in the EU with citizens' ability to hold their own government accountable. This is why democracy should be understood as part of security itself. Institutions able to scrutinise those in power help protect the public resources and trust on which resilience depends. The EU should therefore support Ukraine's defence while also supporting the democratic institutions that help make its security more durable. This responsibility extends to every candidate country: tolerating democratic erosion for

immediate political convenience risks weakening the security benefits of enlargement.

Equal membership after accession

Current proposals for stronger safeguards in future accession treaties raise questions about equal participation even after accession, though their scope, duration and relationship to existing EU mechanisms remain unsettled. The concern behind them is understandable because accession cannot guarantee how future governments will behave, and the EU's current instruments often struggle to prevent sustained backsliding. Nevertheless, the present enlargement methodology already places the fundamentals at the centre of a demanding and reversible process. Once a country has met those requirements and every Member State has approved its admission, membership should carry a presumption of equal trust, grounded in common rules of accountability, so that later intervention responds to what a government does rather than when its country joined. Even safeguards with defined triggers and sunset clauses would preserve a separate layer of control if they applied only to newcomers. The evaluator – evaluatee relationship reflected in the Western Balkan quotations would then survive accession, with entrants continuing to be assessed under separate rules after institutional admission, and conditional belonging would continue inside the Union.

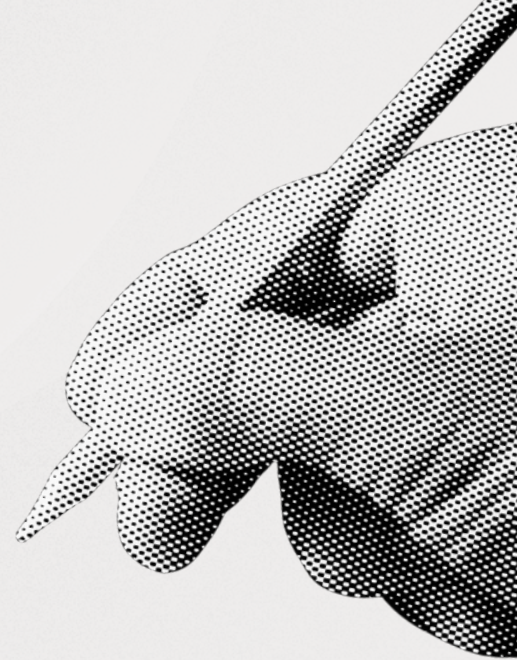
Stronger protection is needed throughout the EU, which is why enlargement has to proceed alongside institutional reform. Transition periods

may be justified where practical adjustment remains necessary, whereas serious democratic or rule-of-law breaches should activate safeguards applicable to every member according to its conduct. Common rules need not mean identical scrutiny: closer monitoring can respond to demonstrated risks wherever they arise. Such a Union could be better able to sustain collective security decisions because it would protect itself without treating some governments as presumptively less trustworthy on the basis of their accession date.

I support enlargement because countries already carrying part of Europe's security burden should, once prepared, be able to participate in the decisions that organise the common

response. Ukraine shows why accession should reinforce democratic accountability as one foundation of durable security.

A larger Union will still contain disagreement, and membership cannot guarantee democratic reliability, but it can place existing cooperation on a more durable basis if reforms receive an honest institutional response and every member is judged by its conduct after accession. If countries enter the Union without escaping the expectation that they must continue proving their place, the political relationship needed for common action will remain more fragile than Europe's present security conditions allow.



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