

RECOMMENDATIONS

FROM MEMBERS OF THE TEPSA NETWORK TO THE INCOMING

LITHUANIAN PRESIDENCY

OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abbreviations

EEAS	European External Action Service
ESC	European Security Council
EU	European Union
HRVP	High Representative / Vice-President of the Commission
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
QMV	Qualified majority voting
TEU	Treaty on European Union
US	United States of America

Introduction



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Finnish President Alexander Stubb has written that "we humans tend to over-rationalize the past, overdramatize the present, and underestimate the future." The words feel especially apt today. Anxiety has become part of daily life for many Europeans. In the east of the Union, people fear an escalation of cyber-attacks and even the possibility of a Russian invasion. Elsewhere, concerns about the cost of living, housing and employment in an economy increasingly shaped by Artificial Intelligence sit alongside fears about irregular migration.

As the world changes, people are looking for stability, hope and some sense of what lies ahead. The European Union (EU) has the scale to help provide that: it reaches beyond the nation-state, and its economic weight gives it a place among the world's major powers. That scale also brings responsibility. The Union must show that it can respond to changes in the global economy and to a more difficult geopolitical environment. The European states are too small. Only via the European Union they can survive the great power competition between China and the United States (US).

The EU has considerable experience in managing crises. A succession of crises has often driven integration forward. But the challenges facing the Union now point to a wider transformation. Technology is changing how economies and societies work. Armed conflict has returned to Europe, while hybrid threats pose new risks to security and democratic institutions. The multilateral system is under strain, and the international cooperation needed to provide public goods is harder to secure. Climate change remains a long-term challenge, even as agreement on how to address it becomes more difficult.

Lithuania will hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2027, in the middle of these changes. The trio of Ireland, Lithuania and Greece brings together three distinct perspectives from across the Union. Each Presidency will have a role to play in advancing European security, competitiveness, democratic values and social cohesion.

Security will have a special place in this conversation. EU Member States agree that Europe must strengthen its defence capabilities. They have been slower, however, to recognise that cooperation can make this effort more effective and less costly. The reasons behind this – both the historical dependence on the US that is very hard to shake and national interests around the industry – are very clear. European countries together have the know-how, the capital and the manpower, the industrial might and externalities that push it to be among the global power centres. Working together, they can build a stronger European defence base and reinforce Europe's position in a changing world. Lithuania's Presidency can help move this work forward. While continuing to support Ukraine, the Union will work on its defence readiness and resilience when it comes to hybrid threats.

The next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) will test the Union's willingness to pool resources for common purposes. The

European Commission has proposed a budget of around EUR 2 trillion for 2028–2034, while the European Parliament has called for a larger budget. Member States, facing tighter budgets, higher spending and a major debt pressure, are pressing for restraint.

Pooling sovereign resources for the common good has long been part of the logic of European integration. The MFF negotiations will show how far that principle can still guide the Union. EU leaders are aiming for an agreement by the end of 2026. If they miss that deadline, Lithuania will inherit difficult negotiations over the resources available to the Union for the next seven years.

Advancing the One Europe, One Market roadmap will be central to the Presidency's work. Completing the Single Market means tackling barriers that still make it harder for people and businesses to operate across borders, while deepening Europe's financial markets and improving access to investment. The Savings and Investments Union, digital trade and energy integration will all require attention. The roadmap sets a deadline of the end of 2027, so Lithuania will have an important role in carrying its work forward. The social dimension should advance alongside it. Fair jobs and initiatives to strengthen young people's resilience are central to social cohesion. The benefits of a more integrated market will be more durable if people can see them in their lives as opportunities.

This will be Lithuania's second Presidency of the Council of the EU. The first one was in 2013, and it was a whole different world. Still, in 2013 Lithuania took over the continuation of the euro crisis right after the Union's "whatever it takes" moment. It was not easy back then, either. The country might be small, but its commitment to the European project is clear. Its emphasis on democratic values, the rule of law, and multilateral cooperation speaks directly to the challenges facing the Union. The Lithuanian Presidency will need to broker agreement among Member States while keeping the Union's shared interests in view.

In addition to European defence, the TEPSA network sees enlargement as a central priority. Ireland aims to conclude accession negotiations with Montenegro. Together with Ukraine, Moldova and Albania, the country is a frontrunner in keeping the EU's promise to candidate countries. The Presidency will play a key role in this dossier. The network also brings in expertise in two important issues: the institutional software of EU foreign policy and historical memory. We hope you will enjoy reading these recommendations.

European defence needs resolve, resources and resilience to deter and resist the EU's adversaries



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The first priority listed by the incoming Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU is "Strengthening security and defence in the EU and the Euro-Atlantic area, ensuring comprehensive support for Ukraine and adequate defence funding". This is a highly ambitious aim for a six-month term, but it reflects the seriousness of the security situation that faces the EU and its Member States – and the other democratic states in Europe.

Europe is threatened from two sides. In the east, Russia continues to wage a brutal war of aggression against Ukraine; it is increasingly coupling this with an "everywhere war", as the Sahaidachnyi Security Center, a Ukrainian think tank, calls it: information operations, cyberattacks, sabotage, assassination plots, drone incursions and other hostile acts designed to disrupt EU support for Ukraine without starting a full-scale war. The number of these attacks, including several in Lithuania, is new; Russia's use of 'hybrid' warfare is not.

What is new and more dangerous to European security is the Trump administration's abandonment of Ukraine and its ambivalent attitude to the Russian threat to Europe. President Donald Trump has allowed Russia to supply diesel to the US market in defiance of US law, refused to apply the sanctions against Russia mandated by the Lindsey Graham Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act (which Trump himself had signed into law in September) and reportedly hampered (or allowed technology tycoon Elon Musk to hamper) Ukraine's access to intelligence and satellite communications for several days to put pressure on President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to end strikes on Russian oil refineries. In doing so, he has undermined both Ukraine's ability to defend itself, and the credibility of the US as a security partner for other European states.

The Lithuanian Presidency is likely to have to navigate at least five defence-related problems in the next six months.

The first is whether the new MFF for 2028-2034 will provide enough money for defence. Member States pay lip service to the need for the EU to spend more on defence and economic competitiveness; but the Irish Presidency's 'negotiating box', informed by what Member States have told the Presidency privately, reportedly maintains a high level of spending on agriculture and cohesion policy, at the expense of other priorities. Member States are making serious efforts to agree the MFF is by the end of 2026, to enable it to be implemented in an orderly fashion from January 2028, but past history suggests that it is quite likely that Lithuania will find itself still trying to broker deals between the Member States in the New Year.

The second is how to ensure that EU and national defence budgets are spent effectively. As the Russian threat has

grown and defence budgets have risen, the EU has been trying to increase the percentage of European defence spending that goes to joint procurement, aiming to capitalise on economies of scale. European Defence Agency data for 2025-2026 shows, however, that collaborative procurement only accounted for 24% of total procurement expenditure in 2025, and is forecast to fall below 10% in 2026. The EU'S 2030 target that 40% of total procurement expenditure should be collaborative seems a long way off. Failure to procure collaboratively risks reducing interoperability, as individual countries procure incompatible equipment; may reduce economies of scale (with many countries procuring small production runs of equipment from national suppliers); and increases the likelihood that countries will buy major weapons systems off the shelf from third countries, rather than investing in developing European solutions.

The third is how the EU should relate to non-EU partners such as the United Kingdom, and to NATO. The EU is not made stronger by excluding like-minded countries from its defence programmes. The unreliability of the Trump administration makes it more urgent that European nations, whether they are EU Member States or not, should find ways to collaborate in strengthening their defence capabilities.

Transatlantic tensions also complicate the development of EU-NATO relations – which became much closer after the EU-NATO Joint Declaration of July 2016. While NATO continues to press for a transatlantic defence market, many European states are already excessively dependent on US weapons systems and defence technology. European Ministries of Defence can no longer assume that US technology will be available when they need it, if the US President decides otherwise. Yet NATO's integrated command structure would be hard for the EU to replace for the foreseeable future; and NATO's members include important European military powers that are not EU members.

The fourth problem is how to support Ukraine militarily in the face of increasingly intense missile attacks from Russia; and how to assimilate the lessons learned by Ukraine on the battlefield into European forces. European leaders are discovering that even collectively, Europe and the US do not produce enough missile defence interceptors to match Russia's production of ballistic missiles. At the same time, European and NATO armies have found in recent exercises that Ukrainians with drones can easily defeat Western forces. Ukraine has mastered the art of inflicting heavy casualties on Russian forces, while reducing the exposure of its own troops.

The fifth is how to respond to intensifying 'hybrid' attacks on targets in the EU. By describing such acts as 'sub-threshold', European governments show that they are unwilling to respond to them with force; the result so far has been to encourage Russia to escalate. It is only a matter of time before such an attack causes casualties. A Member State might then decide to invoke Article 42.7 Treaty on European Union (TEU), the EU's mutual defence guarantee, as France did in 2015 after terrorist attacks in Paris.

Recommendations for the Lithuanian Presidency

1. The Lithuanian Presidency should work with the Presidents of the European Council, the European Commission and the High Representative / Vice-President of the Commission (HRVP) on a consistent public narrative setting out the reality of the Russian threat that the EU faces. The aim should not

be to create panic, but to ensure that Europeans know that there is a serious threat and also that the EU is applying its resources to deterring and defending against Russia, including through working with like-minded countries. The starting point for a consistent European response to Russia is a shared popular understanding of Russia's objectives and actions in relation to the EU and democratic countries in Europe.

2. Assuming that negotiations on the 2028-2034 MFF will continue into 2027, the Lithuanian Presidency should do everything possible to ensure that EU defence programmes are properly resourced, reflecting the threat. EU support for European defence industries should be seen first as essential for the security of the continent; but it is also a driver of innovation and technological advances, and a contributor to the European economy. In the midst of a European security crisis, support for the EU's Defence Technological and Industrial Base should not be sacrificed to maintain the Common Agricultural Policy budget or other traditional areas of spending.

3. The Lithuanian Presidency should work with the Commission, the European Defence Agency and the Member States to ensure that both EU and national resources are used efficiently and effectively. Three important areas to focus on are, first, increasing the proportion of common procurement, thereby driving down the unit costs of systems; second, maximising co-operation with Ukraine in order to learn lessons from its tactical and technological innovations; and third improving co-operation with friendly third countries, particularly in Europe, with a view to avoiding duplicative programmes and capturing economies of scale.

Resetting the institutional software of EU foreign policy



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The EU is a mixed governance system combining supranational and intergovernmental features to foster cooperation among Member States through rules and procedures. It has not evolved into a decisive foreign policy actor capable of mobilising all the levers of power to serve its own interests because it was not meant, and equipped, to be one. EU Member States have refrained from pooling their sovereignty in this domain, and continue to do so because their strategic cultures and threat assessments still differ in various respects, while issues of mutual trust linger.

For about 30 years, through successive rounds of reform culminating with the Treaty of Lisbon, institutional innovation at EU level has sought to tackle the structural weaknesses of EU foreign policy, with limited success. It is unlikely that further reconfigurations of the EU's foreign policy bureaucracy will lead to fundamentally different outcomes.

The long-running debate on reforming EU foreign policy mechanisms has intensified in the course of 2026, centring on two main problems: the dwindling relevance of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the stifling effect of the unanimity requirement on decision-making. Discussions on how to upgrade the EU institutional machinery and streamline policymaking are likely to continue in the coming months, when Lithuania takes over the Presidency of the Council of the EU.

The Lithuanian Presidency can make an important contribution to advancing this controversial debate by framing it in a way that reduces friction while improving the EU's performance on the international stage. The starting point for this approach is to recognise that institutions matter but cannot resolve political problems, and that the problem with EU foreign policy is eminently political: divisions among Member States, with shifting cleavages depending on the issues at stake. This is not to argue that the EU's foreign policy institutional ecosystem functions smoothly or that no reform is required. However, the recent emphasis on the performance of the EEAS, and calls for its potential downsizing, risk missing the wood for the trees.

Too much attention goes to tinkering with the EU's institutional hardware, such as consolidating services and departments, while the one reform that might help unlock political stalemate – extending majority voting to foreign and security policy decisions – remains beyond reach. Conversely, the software through which formal institutions operate – soft rules, flexibility, norms and knowledge-sharing – has been neglected and needs a reset. The Lithuanian Presidency should endeavour to shift the focus of the debate from the institutional hardware to the institutional software of EU foreign policy, and foster practices that enable institutions and Member States to deliver joint action.

The EEAS was expected to foster horizontal coherence (across all aspects of

EU external action) and vertical coherence (among the EU and its Member States) in EU foreign policy. It is broadly acknowledged that, rather than bridging EU institutions and Member States, the EEAS finds itself in a tight institutional spot. The permacrisis has placed the Commission at the forefront of collective crisis management at EU level, seeking to catalyse joint initiatives across multiple areas of external action and venturing into defence industrial policy to support Europe's military readiness. Some Member States have expressed various degrees of scepticism about the added value of the EU's diplomatic branch, although such criticism is often inconsistent, reflecting the heterogeneous concerns and expectations of national capitals.

Recent reform proposals have centered on options for redistributing (some of) the functions attributed to the EEAS among the Commission and the Council, to avoid overlap and reduce costs. In August, a Franco-German 'food for thought' paper envisaged embedding much of the EEAS services within the Commission, while reinforcing the HRVP's role in coordinating external action within the Commission.

The EEAS has struggled to live up to the aspirations that drove its creation, namely to help forge an integrated and strategic approach to EU foreign policy. However, it has operated in a complex, non-permissive institutional environment, and with limited resources. Besides, such aspirations might have been excessive in the first place since, in foreign policy, convergence among EU countries starts in national capitals, not Brussels.

The question is whether bureaucratic reshuffling across institutions will tackle the deeper constraints hampering EU foreign policy. Such constraints stem from two mutually reinforcing sets of factors. For one, an unprecedented range of exogenous threats and systemic challenges is putting EU institutions and Member States under severe stress. For another, trends endogenous to Europe, such as political polarisation, rising nationalism, sluggish growth and fiscal strains, affect political cohesion among Member States.

There is a risk that external pressures, whether deliberate or structural ones, deepen rifts within and between EU countries. For all the current emphasis on familiar inter-institutional frictions in Brussels, therefore, the scarce supply of collective leadership from the European Council and the Foreign Affairs Council represents a far more significant obstacle to empowering EU foreign policy. Relinquishing unanimity in favour of majority voting would contribute to changing the politics of EU foreign policy and paving the way towards faster decision-making. Despite isolated statements in favour of reform, however, there appears to be little chance of Member States agreeing to such an overhaul of the EU's institutional hardware.

Recommendations for the Lithuanian Presidency

Fine tuning the division of tasks and the terms of engagement among Brussels-based bodies, notably the Commission and the EEAS, can help mitigate inter-institutional competition and enhance integrated policymaking. However, outsourcing political convergence among Member States to laborious institutional reform will likely fail to address the root causes of fragmentation and gridlock in EU foreign policy. It is therefore advisable to shift the focus from the institutional hardware to the software of EU foreign policy. The objective is to create more political space for action, help EU

institutions fully harness the EU's toolbox, and better connect EU and national actors, processes and resources across the foreign and security policy agendas. The Lithuanian Presidency can support three lines of action to that effect.

1. First, the Presidency should seek to advance the recommendations recently outlined by 11 EU Member States to minimise the use of veto in foreign policymaking, while striving for consensus. These steps reflect the letter and the spirit of the EU treaties, which national capitals have often ignored. Recommendations include applying the principle of loyal cooperation among EU countries, activating the constructive abstention clause, mobilising the Treaty-based passerelle mechanism to decide by majority voting on selected issues, and requiring that Member States explain why they invoke their veto power, while banning the practice of threatening vetoes to win concessions on unrelated matters. These and other recommendations could be collected in an informal code of conduct that could be adopted by the European Council. Such collective commitment would upgrade the software of EU foreign policy and signal that Member States are prepared to take responsibility for strengthening EU decision-making, delegitimising the use of national vetoes without affecting the hardware of Treaty provisions.

2. Second, the Lithuanian Presidency should help promote flexibility as a core operating principle of EU foreign policy. The practice of groups of Member States (and non-EU partners) taking the lead on distinct foreign policy issues is well established, and this trend has recently consolidated with the launch of the coalition of the willing in support of Ukraine. For this practice to strengthen EU foreign policy as a whole, such groupings ought to pursue goals that fit the EU's foreign policy priorities, associate EU institutions to their activities and regularly report to the Council. The President of the European Council and the HRVP could also play a more proactive role, at their respective levels, by mandating groups of Member States to work out their differences and deliver common positions that could then be considered and endorsed at 27. Such intensive minilateral consultations, leading up to EU action, would contribute to reset the software of EU foreign policy, promoting national engagement to advance common goals through flexible cooperation.

3. Third, the EU reform agenda might expand during the mandate of the Lithuanian Presidency. In the 2026 State of the Union speech, the President of the European Commission endorsed a new reform track, envisaging the creation of a European Security Council (ESC) encompassing EU Member States and some of their closest partners, albeit the mandate and composition of such body are yet to be defined. The envisaged European Security Strategy is expected to further delineate the contours of the ESC alongside other initiatives, namely an Emergency Security Protocol to coordinate crisis response and an Instrument for Strategic Enablers. Difficult questions will need tackling on the added value of the ESC, the decision-making rules therein, the criteria for membership and the connection between ESC's decisions and action at EU level. The Lithuanian Presidency ought to ensure that all Member States engage in this process. If a new ESC is established, its effectiveness will ultimately depend on their ownership of it.

Enabling EU enlargement

1. Restoring credibility to merit-based enlargement: Qualified majority voting at intermediate steps



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Since the Copenhagen criteria, EU enlargement has passed through three phases: a big-bang phase from 1990 to 2004, a protracted phase from 2005 to 2021 marked by enlargement fatigue, and, since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a geopolitical phase. In this third phase, the EU has made a rhetorical U-turn. From the Granada Declaration of 2023, which calls enlargement "a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity", to successive European Council conclusions, enlargement is now presented as a strategic necessity. Yet the EU still works with a methodology last revised in 2020, in the protracted phase, when it was, on balance, more interested in not enlarging than in enlarging. This disconnect between geopolitical ambition and a methodology built for caution risks creating irreversible frustration in the candidate countries, and contributing to the decline of the EU's security, standing and democratic appeal.

The Commission Communication 'Preparing for a wider Union' reiterates that "the accession process remains strictly merit-based and requires sustained progress in implementing the reforms necessary for membership". However, enlargement does not depend only on the merit of the candidate country, but very often on the politics of the current Member States. While experts consistently point to the importance of the credibility of the accession process, the process itself has become steadily more complex and complicated since the big-bang enlargement of 2004. Christophe Hillion has documented how new procedures were added to the process in a piecemeal fashion, resulting in a "complex body of EU accession rules and mechanisms which supplement the basic treaty requirements".

The basic problem is simple: in a merit-based process, the merit of a candidate can be entirely overridden by one Member State derailing the whole process. Ukraine shows this. In April 2025 the Commission stated that Ukraine and Moldova had met all conditions to open the first negotiating cluster (fundamentals), yet it was opened only in June 2026. After Cluster 6 was opened in July 2026, progress stalled again until October, when two more clusters were opened; two remain to be opened. In a geopolitical environment where Russia exploits every opening to divide Europe, and Ukraine is in its fifth year of full-scale war, this recipe for conducting the accession process is disastrous.

The good news is that most of these vetoes are not required by the Treaties and can be removed without Treaty change. Article 49 TEU requires unanimity only twice: when the Council decides on a country's application, which opens the door to negotiations, and at the end, for the accession treaty. That treaty must then be ratified by every Member State according to its own constitution, which in all 27 involves the national parliament and in some, such as France, may involve a

referendum. Member States therefore keep the final word on every new member.

All the other vetoes, at dozens of interim steps, are written into the negotiating frameworks as a practice inherited from the past rather than a legal requirement. The Council adopted these frameworks, and the Council can change them. The Commission's communication now recommends moving to qualified majority voting (QMV) for opening negotiating clusters and other intermediate decisions. At their meeting of 15 and 16 October 2026, EU leaders took note of the communication without endorsing any specific proposal. While the Commission proposal remains vague on which exact interim steps should be removed, the most effective approach would be for unanimity to be removed at all interim steps. This paper therefore makes three recommendations to the Lithuanian Presidency.

1. At the very least, remove the veto on screening letters. After the screening of each cluster, the Council currently follows the practice of agreeing unanimously before the candidate even receives a letter telling it what it has to do to open that cluster. This letter commits the EU to nothing. Blocking it makes no sense in a merit-based process: a candidate cannot show merit on conditions it has not been given. The Lithuanian Presidency should find an agreement, for letters that have not yet been sent, that they should go out automatically unless a qualified majority objects within a set deadline. Member States keep their say on every later decision. If a government then blocks at the next step, it has to do so openly and on a real question, with some political repercussions, rather than quietly in a technical working party.

2. Preferably, move to QMV at all interim steps. This means opening clusters, deciding that benchmarks are met, adopting the EU's negotiating positions and provisionally closing chapters. Unanimity would remain for opening negotiations, concluding them and the accession treaty itself (as foreseen in Article 49 TEU). Should agreement on QMV prove out of reach, the Code of Conduct on Enlargement Decisions proposed by Giselle Bosse in this publication would raise the political cost of blocking in the meantime; the two approaches can also be pursued in parallel.

3. Recognise Ukraine's specific situation through generous gradual integration. EU institutions and Member States should offer Ukraine generous platforms of gradual integration on its path to membership: without derailing the formal accession process, but giving tangible benefits on the way, including targeted measures to support Ukraine’s economic recovery from setbacks such as Russia's blockade of Black Sea ports, the destruction of energy infrastructure and the destruction and closure of steelworks. This requires sufficient funding for Ukraine's defence effort, macro-financial stability, infrastructure repairs and industrial renewal. The Global Europe instrument for the MFF 2028-34 should reflect Ukraine’s specificities, with sufficient flexibility, based on a recognition that a country at war has specific needs and may not be able to align with all sectoral acquis at the same pace as other accession frontrunners.

2. Making EU enlargement assessments and decisions more transparent and fair



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Should QMV in enlargement not win the required unanimity, the Council should adopt a Code of Conduct on Enlargement Decisions: a political commitment by Member States to explain objections that delay accession decisions. The key recommendation for the Presidency is that Lithuania should seek its adoption through Council conclusions by June 2027.

Discussions about how to make enlargement more credible are at the top of the agenda again. They are no longer confined to think tank circles. Member State governments have also weighed in through non-papers on how to reform the enlargement process and methodology, such as the Franco-German non-paper of June 2026. A key issue is how to raise the costs for Member States that block enlargement over bilateral disputes rather than on the basis of a candidate's progress in meeting accession criteria.

Bilateral disputes have oftentimes delayed enlargement decisions. For example, Slovenia blocked progress in Croatia's accession negotiations from December 2008 over their disputed land and maritime border. Greece blocked the opening of accession negotiations with what is now North Macedonia over the country's name, despite the Commission's 2009 recommendation to begin talks. Bulgaria then blocked North Macedonia's negotiating framework in November 2020 over historical and linguistic issues. In October 2026, Croatia linked Montenegro's accession progress to bilateral disputes, including ownership of the Jadran training ship, border demarcation and property claims, rather than solely to its progress in meeting accession requirements. While bilateral concerns should not automatically be dismissed as illegitimate, they nevertheless show how accession decisions can become leverage for resolving disputes beyond candidates' implementation of EU membership requirements.

The Commission's pre-enlargement policy reviews of 6 October 2026 propose the selective introduction of QMV for intermediate steps in accession negotiations. However, the proposal has not gained clear traction. At their 15-16 October meeting, EU leaders took note of the communication and called on the Council to analyse all its strands and take work forward, without endorsing any specific proposal. The Commission's 2026 Enlargement Package of 4 November set out roadmaps for the most advanced candidates but did not explain how the QMV proposal would be taken forward. While several Member States support QMV, introducing it requires unanimity, but unanimous support is very difficult to obtain.

One way to raise the political costs of blocking enlargement, without changing voting rules, is to establish a procedure for discussing objections, scrutinising their grounds and reviewing them as circumstances change. The Council should

therefore adopt a Code of Conduct on Enlargement Decisions with four procedural commitments:

1. Explain the objection: A government preventing an accession decision from advancing should identify in writing the requirement or national interest at stake, its connection to the decision and the change sought. Informal blocking counts too. The Code should include reservations that prevent a decision from reaching a formal vote.

2. Discuss the evidence: The Council Presidency should arrange discussion within an agreed period, first in the relevant preparatory bodies and, where objections remain unresolved, in the General Affairs Council. The Commission should present its assessment, and the candidate country should receive the concern or reservation and have an opportunity to respond. Discussion should establish whether the disagreement concerns facts, interpretation, implementation or the requirement itself.

3. Respond to the candidate's reply: The objecting government should respond within an agreed period, explaining which legal or practical shortcomings remain and why the candidate's reply does not resolve them. If the candidate subsequently changes its legislation or provides new implementation evidence, the government should explain whether this addresses its concerns and, if not, what remains inadequate. Any new demand should require a fresh explanation of its grounds and connection to the accession decision.

4. Record and revisit unresolved issues: A public record (subject to justified confidentiality), should document Member State objections, candidate responses and the reasons why concerns remain unresolved. Each entry should identify the next step and a reconsideration date. Governments should be able to correct factual errors and append their positions, but recording an objection or scheduling its review should not require the objecting government's consent. This would allow national parliaments, the European Parliament and affected publics to examine whether governments' positions remain consistent with the evidence and their earlier explanations.

The Council has discussed such commitments before. The Belgian Presidency's June 2024 report on the Future of Europe proposes a discussion of political commitments to explain vetoes and to restrict them to vital, stated national policy reasons directly connected to the decision concerned. The Code of Conduct on Enlargement Decisions would translate them into a procedure for explaining, discussing and reviewing objections to accession decisions, and it would apply equally to all Member States. Article 4(3) TEU establishes a duty of sincere cooperation, including assisting the Union in its tasks and refraining from jeopardising Union objectives. However, from a legal point of view, it is questionable if dissenting votes during decision-making can actually be treated as legal violations of that duty. The Code should therefore establish political commitments to explain, discuss and act trasnparently while preserving voting rights. Its purpose would be to make objections answerable through politically agreed procedures.

Recommendations for the Lithuanian Presidency

Lithuania can cite the Ireland–Lithuania–Greece trio programme and its announced priorities to justify bringing the issue of predictable and fair accession decisions before the Council yet again. Early in its term, Lithuania could circulate a draft Code based on the Belgian initiative, seek Council Legal Service advice and discuss with national representatives. It should aim for adoption by June 2027 through Council conclusions, prepared through the Council's enlargement working party and the relevant working bodies, and through EU ambassadors in Coreper, before the proposal is submitted to the General Affairs Council. The Council conclusions should enclose the Code in the annex, including its procedures. If consensus proves impossible, Lithuania should invite willing Member States to commit voluntarily to the Code and record their support in Presidency conclusions. Other governments could join later. This would keep the initiative alive, but it should be made explicit that these commitments bind only participating governments politically and do not constitute a Council-wide Code.

Critics may argue that such a Code would make little difference. Yet, past examples from the EU applying politically agreed Codes of Conduct suggests that non-binding commitments can influence governments' behaviour when they set clear standards and governments face scrutiny over whether they honour them. In 2022, the Council credited its Code of Conduct Group on Business Taxation with eliminating a significant amount of harmful tax practices within the EU. The original Code of Conduct on arms-exports likewise left decisions to national governments but committed them to explain refusals and consult one another. A Code of Conduct on Enlargement Decisions would not stop every attempt to block accession progress. It would, however, make it easier to spot and challenge demands that keep changing or objections unrelated to a candidate's reforms. It would also offer governments and candidates a clearer process for addressing genuine concerns.

3. Safeguard clauses can help sell enlargement to Member States, but they are only half the answer



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EU enlargement is currently caught in a trilateral tug-of-war between geopolitical time pressures, a protracted, merit-based accession process and a lack of willingness among Member States to undertake comprehensive reforms to ensure the EU's ability to act. One approach to circumvent this tension is to reform accession treaties instead of EU treaties. It is worth pursuing this approach. However, its pitfalls also need consideration.

The Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU will be tasked with coordinating the work on drafting the accession treaty with Montenegro. The European Commission and a Benelux-Franco-German non-paper propose a new generation of safeguard clauses to be part of the new generation of accession treaties. They should contribute to solving the so-called 'Copenhagen dilemma' as, in the current setup, the conditions required of candidate countries to ensure durable compliance with the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights cannot be effectively imposed on Member States once they have joined.

Transitional measures and safeguard clauses have always been part of accession treaties – mostly in the areas of the Internal Market or Justice and Home Affairs. This sort of flexibility provides new members additional time for adapting to the measures at hand while protecting the functioning of the EU's acquis. The proposals, however, contain two further types: institutional safeguard clauses aimed to protect institutional functioning and complementary arrangements meant to accommodate Member States' opposition to enlargement in certain policy areas. Institutional safeguard clauses are designed to compensate for the current dysfunctional Article 7 TEU procedures and according to the Commission's proposal would apply for 15 years after accession. Complementary sector-specific arrangements could also extend beyond the standard transitional periods – including in agriculture. The accession negotiation framework for Turkey also includes references to potential permanent safeguards in certain policy areas. This would resemble a volunteered sector-specific opt-out.

The Lithuanian Presidency will need to tackle two interrelated questions.

First, how to structure safeguard clauses without establishing some sort of much apprehended second-class membership for countries entering the EU. Hence, the Presidency needs to review the proposals in order to make sure that there will be no breach of the coherence of EU law. Rights and obligations resulting from EU membership must remain equal among Member States. It might also be well advised to review the application period for the institutional safeguard clause.

15 years is a very long time and has the potential to solidify different approaches to different Member States. Additionally, it is everything but a signal of trust towards

new Member States. The United Kingdom was granted five years to test whether to remain part of police and judicial cooperation after the Treaty of Lisbon entered into force. This might be a reference for institutional safeguards for new Member States. If permanent safeguards need to be established, the Presidency would need to find ways of volunteering the new Member State to opt-out of the respective policy.

Second, the Lithuanian Presidency needs to acknowledge that safeguards for new Member States form only part of the answer. The current debates on safeguard clauses in accession treaties turn a blind eye to the fact that they address the so-called Copenhagen dilemma for new Member States but not for the 27 existing ones. The question is, how can we preserve the EU's capacity to act beyond introducing new rules for new Member States. The Commission's pre-enlargement policy review aimed at reviving the spirit of the 2023 Granada declaration by stating that the EU's enlargement and internal reform processes need to run in sync. Engaging in institutional reforms is a difficult, lengthy and at times painful process. This even more so, as several Member States will face national elections during the Lithuanian Presidency. Still, the earlier we start re-engaging, the better.

Risks to democratic standards are by far not a characteristic of new Member States alone. The EU needs sustainable measures to sanction backsliding on Article 2 TEU values and persisting veto positions addressing all Member States. The possibility of suspending voting rights of a new Member State in breach with Art. 2 TEU values by a reversed qualified majority vote is an interesting proposal and should trigger similar considerations for reforming the Art. 7 TEU procedure.

Today, and during the Lithuanian Presidency, treaty change is not in the picture. Still, a plethora of reform proposal below the threshold of treaty change are on the table including the Conference on the Future of Europe, the report of the Franco-German Expert Group on institutional reforms and the Commission's pre-enlargement policy review. The Lithuanian Presidency should engage in getting Member States to start acting upon those proposals.

Threats posed to European societies by the manipulation of historical memory and revisionism



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The expansive imperial military ambitions of Russia continue to pose the main threat to European societies. After all, a full-scale war has returned to the continent for the first time since the Second World War.

Tied into the threat of further Russian aggression is the manipulation of historical memory and revisionism. An old tool, long used by Moscow as part of an approach to keep the population alerted to the fact that Russia, and previously the Soviet Union, is supposedly under attack. Hence the need to defend itself through expansionist policies, an interpretation used also by other large powers to justify military intervention.

For the purposes of considering these issues from today's perspective, the manipulation of historical memory and revisionism itself needs to be put into an historical context.

For example, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 and the Yalta Conference of 1945 (between the then-Allies, the US and the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union) showed how agreements between large powers had already planted the seeds of future controversial interpretations of history. Moscow denied the existence of Stalin's 1939 agreement with Hitler to divide up Europe. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact still remains a thorn in Russia's side, best ignored. The Soviet Union's narrative focused on the liberation from German fascism of European countries, whilst overlooking their subjugation to communist occupation. This approach, in some form or another and with gross distortions, is still prevalent to this day. After all, Russia claims it is defeating fascism in Ukraine.

In contrast, a different approach was taken with the launch of the European Coal and Steel Community 75 years ago. Then, recent historical memory, without any need for revisionism, was the driving force in overcoming past enmities. Societies existing in the free part of Europe at that time faced no threats of history being manipulated for political ends. Indeed, back in 1951, in a Europe still reeling from the devastation wreaked by the Second World War, the six founding members were determined to prevent further conflict amongst them by deciding to integrate their coal and steel industries. Turning the industries of war into a common asset was a core principle. The recent history of the production of weapons used for the destructive war machines was a guiding reflection. There was no need to manipulate that recent history.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, preceded by the re-unification of Germany in 1989, did not herald the so-called "end of history". These momentous events reflected the end of Empire, the start of a process of reuniting Europe and the return of freed Europeans to choose their own destiny.

These events heralded further political and economic advancements, as well as enlargements, which resulted in Europe successfully becoming today's EU. The largest enlargement took place in 2004, with the accession of ten countries, eight of which were liberated from Soviet communism and able to join the natural partners from whom that they had been separated for over half a century.

Since then, Russia has not hesitated to manipulate and revise history.

As Lithuania takes on the Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2027, we will likely be marking the fifth anniversary of Russia's "military operation" (i.e. brutal full-scale war) against Ukraine. It is therefore important to note how Russia's revisionism challenges the idea that it began a full-scale war in February 2022.

We are led to believe that Ukraine had never existed as a country, that it had always been a part of Russia, thereby ignoring Ukraine's history as a nation state and its language being separate from the Russian language. Putin blames the west for provoking the invasion, arguing that Moscow had been forced to defend itself. NATO enlargement has been interpreted as taking place in defiance of a non-existent agreement with Russia not to allow certain East European countries from joining the alliance. Hence the need, referred to earlier, to protect the Russian homeland from attacks by NATO.

In September 2026, Putin referred to a potential direct attack on Kaliningrad by (the defensive alliance) NATO, and used this distorted idea to implicitly threaten the use of nuclear weapons by Russia. This shows how historical revisionism creeps into the revision of contemporary events.

There is a need to recognise and prioritise the issue of revisionism and the way in which the manipulation of history threatens European societies. These actions are part of the state sponsored terrorism emanating from Moscow. They are part of the disinformation and psychological warfare aimed at destabilising societies, and, most crucially, lessening vital support to Ukraine. The use of new technologies, including Artificial Intelligence, the infiltration of social networks with widespread disinformation and fake news add to the mix.

Whilst Russia has led the way in threatening European societies by the manipulation of history and revisionism, there is also a prevailing need for vigilance within European societies themselves. There have been leaders of EU Member States, for example in Hungary and Slovakia, that have gladly embraced the Russian narrative, causing frictions within the bloc. In the same way, populist extremist parties, rapidly gaining traction in Germany (Alternative for Germany), France (National Rally) and elsewhere in Europe seek means of rapprochement with Russia which would inevitably involve accepting its interpretation of historical events, both recent and more distant. Policymakers and the media persisted in referring to the death camps of the Second World War in Nazi-occupied Poland and elsewhere as "Polish death camps". The Benelux countries were never reminded of being "Former German countries" after 1945, in contrast to Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania constantly being referred to as "Former Soviet Union" following their return to freedom.

Progress has been made to counter and halt these types of anomalies, but even recent events show how vigilance needsto be maintained.

The Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the EU could use various approaches to draw attention to the threats posed by

the manipulation and revision of history. A starting point could be to place the threats in the context of the EU's emergence over the past 75 years. In this way, they could be linked to contemporary threats and seen as part of a wider array of threats that will persist in the future. References need to be made to the various existing countermeasures offered by the Council of the EU, the Commission and the European Parliament.

At the same time, relevance to all 27 Member States needs to be displayed. Illustrations of common threads and focuses on north-south similarities as opposed to traditional east-west differences could be highlighted. The rotating Presidencies mean that Greece and Italy will follow Lithuania. Their own historical experiences, with their respective regime of the Colonels (1967-1974) and Mussolini's fascist rule (1922-1943) could be explored to show the use of revisionism during those periods. This process could in turn offer a "bridge of experience" to Latvia's presidency in the second half of 2028.

The Lithuanian Presidency could offer cultural events around the theme of manipulation of history, giving a contemporary slant to bring in Ukraine's experience of over a decade of war. Finally, in order to avoid a sense of complacency, Lithuania could also offer examples of challenges faced within EU countries themselves and other partner democracies.

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