



**P9\_TA(2024)0120**

## **Deepening EU integration in view of future enlargement**

**European Parliament resolution of 29 February 2024 on deepening EU integration in view of future enlargement (2023/2114(INI))**

(C/2024/6746)

*The European Parliament,*

- having regard to the Treaty on European Union (TEU), in particular its Articles 5(3), 48 and 49,
- having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,
- having regard the Council conclusions of December 2006, March 2020 and to the Presidency Conclusions of the European Council in Copenhagen of 21-22 June 1993, also known as the Copenhagen Criteria,
- having regard to its resolution of 13 December 2023 on 30 years of Copenhagen criteria – giving further impetus to EU enlargement policy <sup>(1)</sup>,
- having regard to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR) and to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union,
- having regard to the Manifesto of Ventotene,
- having regard to its recommendation of 23 November 2022 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning the new EU strategy for enlargement <sup>(2)</sup>,
- having regard to the Committee of the Regions' opinion of 5-6 July 2022 on the Commission's Enlargement Package 2022, as well as the President of the Committee of the Region's statement of 8 November 2023 on the Commission's 2023 Enlargement package,
- having regard to the Commission's report of 9 February 2022 on cohesion in Europe towards 2050,
- having regard to the European Council conclusions of 23-24 June 2022, and 29-30 June 2023, 26-27 October 2023, and 14-15 December 2023,
- having regard to the Commission's Analytical reports of 2 February 2023 on Ukraine's (SWD(2023)0030), Moldova's (SWD(2023)0032) and Georgia's (SWD(2023)0031) alignment with the EU acquis,
- having regard to the Commission's Joint-Communication to the European Council of 29 November 2023 on the State of Play of EU-Türkiye political, economic and trade relations (JOIN(2023)0050),
- having regard to the conclusions of the General Affairs Council of 29-30 April 1997 on the application of conditionality with a view to developing a coherent EU strategy for relations with the countries in the Western Balkan region,
- having regard to its previous resolutions on the matter, in particular that of 24 October 2019 on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania <sup>(3)</sup>, and its resolutions on the 2022 Commission reports on Kosovo <sup>(4)</sup>, Serbia <sup>(5)</sup>, Albania <sup>(6)</sup>, Bosnia and Herzegovina <sup>(7)</sup>, North Macedonia <sup>(8)</sup> and Montenegro <sup>(9)</sup>,

<sup>(1)</sup> Texts adopted, P9\_TA(2023)0471.

<sup>(2)</sup> OJ C 167, 11.5.2023, p. 105.

<sup>(3)</sup> OJ C 202, 28.5.2021, p. 86.

<sup>(4)</sup> OJ C, C/2023/1066, 15.12.2023, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2023/1066/oj>.

<sup>(5)</sup> OJ C, C/2023/1065, 15.12.2023, ELI: <http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2023/1065/oj>.

<sup>(6)</sup> Texts adopted, P9\_TA(2023)0285.

<sup>(7)</sup> Texts adopted, P9\_TA(2023)0284.

<sup>(8)</sup> OJ C 479, 16.12.2022, p. 33.

<sup>(9)</sup> OJ C 32, 27.1.2023, p. 63.

- having regard to its recommendation of 19 June 2020 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Western Balkans, following the 2020 summit <sup>(10)</sup>,
- having regard to the European Council conclusions of 19 and 20 June 2003 and the Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans,
- having regard to EU Association Agreements with Albania <sup>(11)</sup>, Bosnia and Herzegovina <sup>(12)</sup>, Georgia <sup>(13)</sup>, Kosovo, the Republic of Moldova <sup>(14)</sup>, Montenegro, North Macedonia <sup>(15)</sup>, Serbia, Türkiye <sup>(16)</sup> and Ukraine <sup>(17)</sup>,
- having regard to the Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on establishing the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans (COM(2023)0692),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 5 February 2020 entitled ‘Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans’ (COM(2020)0057), and to the Commission strategy for ‘A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans’ of February 2018,
- having regard to its resolution of 23 June 2022 on the candidate status of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia,
- having regard to its resolution of 5 October 2023 on taking stock of Moldova’s path to the EU <sup>(18)</sup>,
- having regard to the European Court of Auditors special report 01/2022 of 10 January 2022 entitled ‘EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persist’,
- having regard to the Commission’s 2022 Enlargement package of 12 October 2022,
- having regard to the 2023 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy to the Enlargement Package adopted by the European Commission on 8 November 2023 (COM(2023)0690),
- having regard to the Regulation (EU) 2021/1529 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 September 2021 establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III) <sup>(19)</sup>,
- having regard to the European Economic and Social Committee’s opinion of 10 July 2014 on enhancing the transparency and inclusiveness of the EU accession process <sup>(20)</sup>,
- having regard to its resolutions of 16 February 2017 on improving the functioning of the European Union building on the potential of the Lisbon Treaty <sup>(21)</sup>, and of 11 July 2023 on the implementation of the passerelle clauses in the EU Treaties <sup>(22)</sup>,
- having regard to the report of 9 May 2022 on the final outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe of 9 May 2022 and to its resolution of 4 May 2022 on the follow-up to the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe <sup>(23)</sup>,

<sup>(10)</sup> OJ C 362, 8.9.2021, p. 129.

<sup>(11)</sup> OJ L 107, 28.4.2009, p. 166.

<sup>(12)</sup> OJ L 164, 30.6.2015, p. 2.

<sup>(13)</sup> OJ L 261, 30.8.2014, p. 4.

<sup>(14)</sup> OJ L 260, 30.8.2014, p. 4.

<sup>(15)</sup> OJ L 84, 20.3.2004, p. 13.

<sup>(16)</sup> OJ L 361, 31.12.1977, p. 29.

<sup>(17)</sup> OJ L 161, 29.5.2014, p. 3.

<sup>(18)</sup> Texts adopted, P9\_TA(2023)0357.

<sup>(19)</sup> OJ L 330, 20.9.2021, p. 1.

<sup>(20)</sup> REX/401-EESC-2014- 1609.

<sup>(21)</sup> OJ C 252, 18.7.2018, p. 215.

<sup>(22)</sup> Texts adopted, P9\_TA(2023)0269.

<sup>(23)</sup> OJ C 465, 6.12.2022, p. 109.

- having regard to its resolutions of 9 June 2022 on the call for a Convention for the revision of the Treaties <sup>(24)</sup>, and of 22 November 2023 on proposals of the European Parliament for the amendment of the Treaties <sup>(25)</sup>, and activation of Article 48 TEU asking the European Council to agree on calling a Convention to reform the Treaties,
  - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
  - having regard to the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Constitutional Affairs (A9-0015/2024),
- A. whereas nine of the 10 countries currently aspiring to join the EU have candidate status, some of them for many years; whereas those candidate countries find themselves at various stages of the accession process and negotiations;
- B. whereas following the Commission's recommendations in the 2023 enlargement package, on 14 December 2023 the European Council decided to grant candidate status to Georgia and to open accession negotiations with Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova as well as with Bosnia and Herzegovina, once the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria has been achieved;
- C. whereas Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and other ongoing geopolitical challenges have given new geostrategic meaning to the enlargement of the European Union; whereas the stability, security and democratic resilience of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood are inextricably linked to those of the EU;
- D. whereas enlargement is a moral and historic commitment, and a strategic geopolitical priority representing a geostrategic investment in the future, which will contribute to peace, stability, security, democracy, unity, the fight against climate change, as well as, ensuring prosperity and well-being on the European continent; whereas the EU's security also rests on its ability to defend, advance and sustain peace, democracy, the rule of law, human rights and fundamental values; whereas enlargement can be mutually beneficial for both existing and future Member States, and their citizens as long as the proper conditions and requirements are met;
- E. whereas enlargement has become one of the strongest EU policy and geopolitical tools; whereas according to the Eurobarometer of June 2023, the majority of the EU's population is in favour of the future enlargement of the EU; whereas a new impetus, commitments and vision are urgently needed to re-energise the enlargement process, ensuring its continuity, consistency and impact; whereas the lack of engagement in previous years has created a vacuum, thus opening the space for Russia and China and other external actors; whereas the principle of mutual and sincere cooperation must always be respected;
- F. whereas accession to the EU must always be a merit-based procedure whereby each applicant is assessed on its own merits in terms of its fulfilling the Copenhagen criteria in their entirety, including those of ensuring a continuous full respect for human rights, including the rights of minorities, democracy, and the rule of law, as well as for the other fundamental values of the EU; whereas positive outcomes should be sought as quickly as possible, while avoiding fast-tracking or pre-defined deadlines;
- G. whereas stagnation or backtracking must have consequences, as the entire accession process needs to be based on fair and rigorous conditionality;
- H. whereas accession to the EU requires ambitious integration agenda capacity from both the EU and the candidate countries; whereas fundamental reforms in the areas of the judiciary, the fight against corruption, media freedom and pluralism are necessary for candidate countries to progress along their path towards the EU;
- I. whereas it would be advantageous to complete the pending membership of the existing Member States in the Euro and Schengen area along with the next enlargement;
- J. whereas the countries of the Western Balkans must also focus on conflict resolution, regional cooperation and reconciliation; whereas there is no place in the EU or in the countries aspiring to become Member States for inflammatory rhetoric, genocide denial or glorification of war criminals from any side; whereas coming to terms with the past is the only way to achieve genuine reconciliation, which is crucial for prosperous societies and successful integration;
- K. whereas the processes of widening and deepening the EU must go in parallel as they have the capacity to mutually reinforce each other, multiplying their impact and significantly contributing to the overarching objectives for which the EU was created;

<sup>(24)</sup> OJ C 493, 27.12.2022, p. 130.

<sup>(25)</sup> Texts adopted, P9\_TA(2023)0427.

- L. whereas the challenge of a bigger European Union demands an enhanced enlargement policy, based on gradual integration into common policies and with clear benefits for citizens throughout the process;
- M. whereas, in the context of enlargement, there is a need to look in a holistic way at the review of current and future European policies, structural reforms, institutional changes and the multiannual financial framework (MFF) for 2028-2034;
- N. whereas the countries of the Western Balkans have for decades stated their determination to join the EU; whereas on 24 June 2022-24 June 2022 EU leaders reconfirmed a full and unequivocal commitment to the EU membership perspective of the Western Balkans;
- O. whereas candidate countries must demonstrate their adherence to the fundamental values of the EU, and also alignment with the EU's policies and positions, including its common foreign and security policy (CFSP);
- P. whereas some Western Balkan countries have reached a high degree of alignment with the EU's CFSP in recent years, including sanctions against Russia in response to its war of aggression against Ukraine; whereas in March 2023 Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia launched the 'Western Balkans QUAD – 100 % alignment with EU Common Foreign Security Policy (CFSP)' platform;
- Q. whereas the EU must demonstrate a clear political will to support the candidate countries and should step up considerably its conditional technical and financial support for fundamental reforms, the resolution of bilateral disputes, economic convergence and regional economic integration in accession countries; whereas the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans aims to accelerate fundamental reforms, enhance the countries' integration into the EU's single market as well as boost economic integration of the region;
- R. whereas malign foreign actors are using hybrid interference methods to impact and derail EU integration;
- S. whereas Parliament is undoubtedly the most supportive EU institution when it comes to enlargement; whereas Parliament's role remains extremely limited throughout the entire enlargement process and should be strengthened in order to increase democratic legitimacy and accountability, including in evaluating the intermediate steps of the accession, inter alia through regular committee meetings and parliamentary scrutiny of pre-accession funding, while making use of its existing tools and instruments, including democracy support programmes; whereas regional and local administrations and civil society organisations should be structurally involved in the enlargement process and its scrutiny;
- T. whereas major initiatives such as the European Political Community, which has already held three official meetings, enable political cooperation and contribute to regional dialogues in different domains between the EU and other countries, but are not alternatives to EU membership;
- U. whereas significant pre-enlargement reforms are needed to guarantee the efficient functioning of the enlarged EU and its capacity to absorb new members and to promote their successful integration as well as to respond properly to the many challenges it currently faces; whereas this could imply significant changes in the EU's institutional framework, and the possible advancement of differentiated integration solutions whenever the Treaties allow; whereas some of those solutions have been discussed for some time already; whereas in order to achieve this, the EU should also take full advantage of the flexibility afforded by the Treaty of Lisbon ahead of a more in-depth reform in the context of a possible revision of the treaties;
- V. whereas the EU faces considerable challenges to delivering effective crisis management and, in particular, in decision-making procedures, whereas the EU's credibility and ability to act in a timely and effective manner depends on democratic and efficient decision-making, and even more so in an enlarged EU of 30 or more Member States; whereas it is clear that the EU institutions and decision-making mechanisms, especially in the Council, are unfit for a Union with an increased number of Member States; whereas political will and efficient decision-making leading to timely and coordinated internal and external action is vital to safeguard the EU's interests and its global geopolitical leadership and credibility; whereas recent difficulties with EU decisions on sanctions confirm the need to move away from unanimity; whereas a profound reform of the EU's institutional framework and governance structures, with simplified, more effective and democratic decision-making procedures, must be implemented where necessary in parallel with the ongoing accession negotiations;

- W. whereas *passerelle* clauses could be used immediately to switch from the requirement for unanimity to qualified majority voting in specific policy areas; whereas Parliament has activated the Treaty revision procedure and has submitted proposals for the amendment of the Treaties to the Council in accordance with Article 48(2) TEU; whereas the President of the Commission announced during her speech at the European Parliament on 17 January 2024 the forthcoming presentation of a Communication on Treaty Reform paving the way for a discussion in the European Council, in the near future;
- X. whereas the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission have committed to following up effectively on the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe; whereas the Conference on the Future of Europe called on the EU to agree on a strong vision and a common strategy to consolidate its unity and improve the decision-making capacity of the EU in view of future enlargement; whereas many of these proposals can only be implemented if there are changes to the Treaties;
- Y. whereas democratic backsliding is among the greatest threats facing the European Union, both internally and externally;
- Z. whereas the mechanism to ensure compliance with the EU's fundamental principles and values and the *acquis communautaire* must also be strengthened in parallel with the next enlargement; whereas the implementation of the *acquis* should be thoroughly and objectively monitored for each candidate state;
- AA. whereas enlargement is both a major financial challenge for the EU, in particular, cohesion and agriculture policies, as well as other EU programmes and policies and an opportunity to reform the EU; whereas the current and future MFFs should be reviewed, reprioritised, properly constructed and significantly strengthened and their governance overhauled to enable and underpin substantial EU enlargement without jeopardising the support needed in current Member States; whereas this financial groundwork must be in place prior to enlargement;
- AB. whereas the reconstruction and post-war recovery of Ukraine is an additional challenge to be addressed in the wider context of an international effort;

### ***On the strategic dimension of enlargement***

1. Welcomes the aspiration of numerous European countries and their citizens to join the EU and acknowledges their political will and the serious efforts they have made to meet the requirements for membership;
2. Believes that enlargement is of the utmost strategic importance for the EU; reaffirms that an enhanced enlargement policy has become one of the strongest EU policy and geopolitical tools representing a geostrategic investment in long-term peace, democracy, stability, security, climate protection and prosperity across the continent and all the more so in the face of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and other common geopolitical challenges, requiring a long-term political vision and bold decisions; emphasises the political urgency of demonstrating the EU's commitment to the international rules-based order; insists that given the major security challenges facing Europe, the enlargement of the EU, and the inclusion of Ukraine in the Western collective security and defence systems, will strengthen European security;
3. Welcomes the Commission's recommendations in the 2023 enlargement package and further welcomes the European Council's decisions to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, to grant Georgia candidate status on the understanding that the relevant steps set out in the Commission recommendation of 8 November 2023 are taken and to open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, once the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria has been achieved; invites the Council to task the Commission to immediately submit proposals for the relevant negotiating frameworks and to adopt them once the relevant steps set out in the respective Commission recommendations of 8 November 2023 are taken;

### ***On accession procedures and the role of the European Parliament***

4. Acknowledges the historic opportunity and challenge facing the EU of meeting its commitments to the countries and the peoples of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia, and of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia; recognises the importance of the European integration of these crucial partners; also recognises the importance of regional cooperation within the respective regions of the Eastern Partnership, and the Western Balkans;

5. Reiterates the view that Türkiye's EU accession process cannot be resumed in the current circumstances; urges the Turkish Government to break the current deadlock and move forward towards a closer, more dynamic and strategic partnership by developing a realistic parallel framework of cooperation, such as a modernised association agreement and calls on the Commission to explore possible formats for such a framework; recalls that any improvement in EU-Türkiye relations must be based on tangible progress on human rights, democracy and respectful neighbourly relations;

6. Underlines that accession to the EU must always be a merit-based procedure and that each applicant must be assessed on its own merit in terms of its meeting the Copenhagen criteria in their entirety; underscores that there can be no shortcuts on EU values and fundamental principles; highlights that the rule of law, democratic reform, media freedom and respect for human rights, including the rights of minorities, should be put at the forefront of the accession process, with judicial independence, the fight against corruption and the empowerment of civil society being crucial preconditions for progress along the path to EU membership;

7. Requests that effective monitoring mechanisms to protect fundamental values and the sound financial interests of the Union in the context of accession procedures be enhanced; reiterates in this regard its calls to include candidate countries in the EU rule of law mechanism and its annual reporting exercise, automatically activating pre-accession cooperation and verification mechanisms; supports the Commission's intention to include accession countries into the Rule of Law Reports, insists that they feed into the annual progress reports;

8. Encourages enlargement countries to continue to resolutely implement the necessary reforms and make tangible and irreversible progress, starting with the fundamentals of the EU accession process;

9. Insists on the need for continuous efforts to foster media pluralism, defend the rights of journalists and ensure freedom of expression in all candidate countries;

10. Points out that alignment with the EU's CFSP is also an essential indicator of full adherence to the EU's fundamental principles and sustainable future membership; urges all candidate and potential candidate countries to prioritise a swift and full alignment with the CFSP and reiterates that accession of a given country can proceed only once it aligns with the EU's restrictive measures, including sanctions put in place in response to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine;

11. Calls for the EU's enlargement strategy to be thoroughly evaluated and for the reasons for the limited progress made by some enlargement countries to be assessed, particularly in the areas of the rule of law, human rights and democracy;

12. Considers the Commission's revised methodology, which should be updated to include the accession processes of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, to be a long-term policy framework, guiding the enlargement process;

13. Stresses that while the process should become more incremental and dynamic and the EU should set concrete individual reform targets, roadmaps and intermediate timelines for each accession country, there can be no fast-track or pre-defined deadlines for membership, as they could affect the integrity of the accession process; believes, however, that the next EU enlargement should take place as soon as all accession conditions are met in the candidate countries concerned and in parallel the necessary European reforms are agreed and implemented; expects that the first candidate countries will be ready to join the Union by the end of this decade;

14. Insists that EU enlargement is a shared responsibility of the current and aspiring Member States; calls on the Member States to demonstrate a clear and unequivocal political commitment towards the enlargement process, based on objective criteria and not misused to settle bilateral disputes, which should be resolved separately from the accession process; stresses that excessive delays on the way towards full EU membership can negatively impact both public opinion and the political commitment of candidate countries;

15. Underlines that accession processes can take place in a reversible manner, and that the merit-based approach can also lead to freezing of the accession negotiations in the event of backsliding on fundamental values, and can only be resumed after significant progress on reforms; calls for robust and enhanced monitoring, reporting and assessment of the reforms and progress made by the candidate countries in all the negotiating chapters with a strategically applied targeted conditionality based on clear progress benchmarks, sanctioning regression on fundamentals or persistent stagnation in reforms and rewarding reforms and fulfilment of benchmarks through clear negotiation timelines;

16. Calls on the Commission to improve the consistency, efficiency and transparency of pre-accession assistance, clearly reflecting the priorities in the fundamental areas in the allocation of IPA III funding; calls, in particular, for the introduction of stricter and more enforceable accountability with regard to spending and for improvement of the overall cycle of disbursement, implementation and scrutiny of pre-accession funding, applying strict conditionality, including in the implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan and the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans; invites the Commission to carry out a mid-term review of the IPA III Regulation and to propose the listing of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia as its beneficiaries, invites the Commission to swiftly implement the recommendations of the European Court of Auditors Special Report 01/2022;

17. Calls for options to further strengthen protection of the rule of law and the EU's democratic values against backsliding for both existing and future Member States to be explored in the context of Treaty reform, ensuring that enlargement strengthens the EU and its single market;

18. Highlights the need to ensure that EU funding provided to enlargement countries is in line with the EU's own strategic goals and interests; calls on the Commission to financially support those accession countries that work towards good neighbourly relations, inclusive regional cooperation and sustainable reconciliation, including but not limited to the prosecution of war criminals and ensuring access to truth, justice and effective reparations to victims of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide;

19. Calls on the accession countries to enhance judicial cooperation with the EU in criminal matters under the working arrangements with the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) in order to facilitate effective investigation and prosecution of the misuse of EU funds, including through the secondment of national liaison officers to the EPPO, and stepping up the administrative capacity of local administrations;

20. Reiterates its position on the need for strengthened, formal, structured and systematic cooperation between the EU and the Council of Europe in supporting accession countries on reforms, ensuring their compliance with all the recommendations of the Venice Commission on their path towards EU membership;

21. Believes that the challenge of an expanded EU requires an enhanced enlargement policy putting in place a clear incremental pathway towards EU membership, including gradual integration into common policies, such as the single market, for those countries that complete negotiations in a given policy chapter or that make substantial progress on EU-related reforms; notes that such progress should enable access to EU funds in the respective areas so as to bring clear benefits for citizens throughout the process; notes that this pathway should be accompanied by increased technical and conditional financial assistance with a special focus on the implementation and enforcement of laws under negotiating clusters on fundamentals and external relations, notably chapters 23, 24, 30 and 31; invites the Commission to present detailed proposals on the incremental accession methodology, including clear 'graduation' and reversibility clauses; underlines that the phasing-in of candidate countries into selected policy areas with limited rights and obligations is by no means a substitute for or an alternative to fully fledged membership;

22. Acknowledges the importance of initiatives such as the European Political Community, which enable political cooperation and contribute to regional dialogues and which could facilitate the gradual integration of candidate countries into the Union and to its policies, but are not alternatives to EU membership;

23. Stresses that it could be useful to have a separate post of Commissioner for Enlargement;

24. Suggests considering granting candidate countries observer status in relevant bodies and institutions, including Parliament, initially on the basis of temporary arrangements if negotiations are sufficiently advanced, in particular on clusters on fundamentals and external relations, and all conditions are met and agreed, until the accession treaties have been signed; welcomes in this regard the decision of the European Economic and Social Committee to include observers from candidate countries as of 2024;

25. Considers there to be a need for stronger, more effective and meaningful European Parliament decision-making and oversight of the EU's enlargement policy and its funding, so as to increase democratic legitimacy and accountability; insists on strengthening the role of Parliament throughout the entire accession process, including the intermediate steps, covering a full scrutiny of the progress made by the candidate countries across policy fields; commits to enhance regular and transparent dialogue and cooperation with the national parliaments of candidate countries as a model for parliamentary scrutiny of EU integration;

26. Underlines the need to strengthen democracy support through the existing channels and instruments, such as the Jean Monnet Dialogue, the Inter-party Dialogue (IPD) and the Parliamentary Dialogue Process (PDP);

27. Calls on the EU institutions and Member States to fully engage in further strengthening the reform processes in the candidate countries, in particular their administrative capacities;

28. Highlights the need to step up transparency, empower citizens' participation and close involvement of the civil society in the enlargement process and its scrutiny, ensuring its sustainable funding;

29. Underlines that the enlargement process must not inadvertently perpetuate or exacerbate disparities based on sexual orientation and gender identity; urges the Commission and candidate countries to integrate measures within the enlargement process that actively promote and ensure the rights of LGBTIQ individuals, such as developing policies that eliminate discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, enhancing LGBTIQ participation in decision-making processes, and fostering inclusivity in the political, economic, and social spheres through education and awareness-raising activities; calls on the Commission and candidate countries to duly monitor and evaluate the status of LGBTIQ rights in candidate countries;

30. Considers that the accession process must ensure that candidate countries increase their efforts related to equal rights for persons with disabilities; emphasises the need to increase pressure on candidate countries to implement reforms to improve the situation of persons with disabilities and to increase their efforts in terms of deinstitutionalisation including the transition from institutional to family and community-based care;

### ***On European institutional and financial reforms***

31. Considers that the processes of preparing for enlargement should proceed in parallel in the EU and accession countries; stresses that European institutional and financial reforms are needed to face current challenges and to ensure the EU's capacity to absorb new members and to promote their successful integration; calls on the EU Institutions and Member States to undertake the necessary reforms to ensure that their absence does not delay the accession of new Member States; notes that these reforms are needed to strengthen the EU and its institutions so as to promote democratic legitimacy, good governance, functionality, accountability, transparency and sustainability; stresses, in particular, the importance of bolstering the democratic legitimacy of EU policies by reinforcing Parliament's decision-making and scrutiny rights; reiterates, therefore, its calls to grant Parliament a general and direct right of legislative initiative;

32. Firmly believes that European institutional reforms should increase the EU's ability to act, and include simplified and more effective decision-making procedures, moving away from unanimity; reiterates that qualified majority voting should be implemented in areas such as the protection of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the MFF, sanctions and other relevant foreign policy decisions, such as the start of EU accession negotiations, the opening and closing of individual negotiation clusters and sanctioning of backtracking, but with the exception of decisions authorising military missions or operations with an executive mandate;

33. Calls for the mechanism to protect the rule of law and the EU's fundamental principles and values, and the monitoring capacity to ensure compliance with the Copenhagen criteria, to be strengthened ahead of the next round of enlargement; proposes that the procedure in Article 7 TEU be reformed by ending unanimity in Council decisions, by introducing a clear timeframe, and by making the Court of Justice the arbiter of violations; points out that the introduction of qualified majority voting (QMV) in this respect would facilitate the enlargement process; stresses the need for further reform of the rule of law conditionality mechanism to cover and guarantee all of the Union's fundamental values as defined in Article 2 TEU;

34. Believes that in the context of full membership, differentiated integration is part of the solution for an efficient and deepened enlarged EU; underlines, however, that respect for the Union's values as set out in Article 2 TEU is non-negotiable, should not be subject to any derogations or opt-outs and that membership of the Union has to require a strong commitment to respect all EU law; considers also that a broad area of European common ground must always be ensured, covering areas such as the customs union, the single market and its four freedoms, the core social *acquis*, and agricultural, competition and trade policies; notes that beyond this common ground, Member States willing to move European integration forward in a wider array of policy areas should be allowed to do so; underlines that under such a system of differentiated integration, while all Member States would take part in decisions about issues in the area of common ground, only Member States willing to participate in areas of deepened integration would take part in the decisions concerned; notes that differentiated integration also implies differentiated financial arrangements;

35. Calls for the full use of the flexibility provided for in the Treaty of Lisbon ahead of a more in-depth reform in the context of a possible revision of the treaties; recalls that a number of flexibility instruments, such as *passerelle* clauses, enhanced cooperation, constructive abstentions, permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) and opt-out mechanisms are already possible under the current EU legal framework, as the experience of the Schengen area, one of the greatest achievements of the Union, and the euro area clearly show; recalls that phasing-in solutions, temporary derogations and transition periods can be negotiated in the context of accession procedures; points out that the use of these flexibility mechanisms should not prevent constructive discussions on treaty revision, as endorsed by Parliament in its resolution of 22 November 2023;

36. Notes that institutional pre-enlargement reforms must also address the implications of enlargement for the composition of Parliament; recalls that the European Parliament is the only directly elected institution representing EU citizens; underlines that, while ensuring appropriate democratic representativeness, Parliament should remain at a workable size; points out, however, that a reasonable increase in the size of Parliament cannot be ruled out in order to ensure sufficient democratic representativeness in an enlarged EU; insists on a new system for seat allocation based on a permanent mathematical formula, which is objective, fair, transparent and durable; recalls its position that seat allocation in the European Parliament should be considered together with the voting system in the Council;

37. Stresses the need for a swift revision of the Council's functioning and decision-making process in view of enlargement; proposes to review the system of rotating presidencies of the Council; notes that the calculation of qualified majority voting thresholds should also be reconsidered to improve the balance between larger and smaller states and to set higher thresholds for the most important decisions; calls for the utmost transparency and integrity of the Council's decision-making process in the context of enlargement;

38. Notes that the composition of the Commission must take enlargement into account and recalls in this regard the flexibility provided for in the Treaty of Lisbon; highlights that any reassessment of the practice of appointing one Commissioner per Member State must ensure a geographically balanced composition of the Commission;

39. Reiterates its call for the strengthening of the instruments for citizens' participation in the EU decision-making process;

40. Stresses that enlargement is both a major financial challenge for the EU, in particular regarding cohesion and agriculture policies, and an opportunity to reform the EU; points out that this challenge requires a properly designed, prioritised and funded MFF and a more effective EU budget that enables the Union to take on new commitments while continuing to deliver on existing programmes and political priorities; further stresses that sufficient additional and genuine own resources are also needed to meet the enlargement challenge; notes that enlargement adds to other growing demands on EU funding in the fields of financial stability, strategic autonomy, health, energy, decarbonisation, the clean energy transition, environmental protection, digitalisation, research, defence and security; underlines that such financial reforms must be considered in parallel with the ongoing accession negotiations and adopted ahead of enlargement; defends its position that the current and future MFF architecture should be restructured and significantly strengthened to increase resilience; underlines the need to take the accession of new members into account during preparation of the 2028-2034 MFF;

41. Calls on the Commission and candidate countries to guarantee the special role of SMEs as a main pillar in strengthening industrial policies and enhance the countries' ability to achieve a just transition and adapt to technological challenges on the way to an inclusive digital transition;

42. Reiterates its calls on the Council, the Commission and the EEAS to improve strategic communication and visibility of both the mutual socio-economic benefits and challenges of enlargement in the accession countries and the Member States alike via an effective information campaign strategy throughout the enlargement process, demonstrating tangible results of the ongoing accession process and of each round of negotiations;

43. Reiterates its calls for the recommendations of the Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE) to be implemented, in particular by stepping up efforts to counter disinformation and prevent foreign malign interference and attempts to undermine democracy and to derail EU integration by sabotaging political, economic and social stability in the candidate countries;

44. Points out that the reconstruction and post-war recovery of Ukraine is a multidimensional challenge to be addressed in the wider context of an international effort; stresses that funding for Ukraine must stem from multiple international sources, including frozen Russian assets; underlines that these investments will come with associated financial risks and insists that this process must be closely monitored and embedded in a well-designed, tailor-made legislative framework, that is corruption and fraud proof; calls, in this regard, for swift adoption of the Regulation establishing the Ukraine Facility;

45. Welcomes the Commission's work on pre-enlargement policy and the funding review, and calls for a thorough impact assessment of the implications of enlargement; supports the creation of an effective EU-supported conflict resolution and mediation mechanism outside the enlargement framework, dedicated to fostering reconciliation and resolving bilateral issues in accession countries, helping to find and implement definitive binding solutions to regional and bilateral disputes and the legacies of the past;

46. Calls for the European elections 2024 to be taken as an opportunity to debate and present the need for and the benefits of the process of deepening and enlarging the European Union; and the necessary European political, institutional and financial reforms;



47. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the governments and parliaments of the Member States, and the governments and parliaments of the accession countries.

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