

# EU Expansion

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**Last updated:** 25 May 2026

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## Overview

The Ukraine war has fundamentally accelerated EU enlargement — unprecedented speed from application (Feb 2022) to candidate negotiations (June 2024) for Ukraine and Moldova. But the process remains uneven, with the Western Balkans stalled in decade-long negotiations and Georgia frozen. Orbán's fall (Apr 2026) is the most significant political development for enlargement — removing the single biggest obstacle.

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## Ukraine — Accession Status: Candidate Negotiating

- **Applied:** 28 Feb 2022 (4 days after Russian invasion)
- **Candidate status granted:** 23 June 2022
- **Negotiations opened:** 25 June 2024 (simultaneously with Moldova)
- **Bilateral screening completed:** 30 Sept 2025
- **Chapters opened:** 0 of 33

### What's blocked:

- **Hungary** under Orbán blocked opening of negotiations clusters through 2025 — argued integrating "a country at war"
- Orbán's fall (Apr 2026) is the breakthrough: **Kyiv and Budapest launched talks on Hungarian minority rights** (18 May 2026) — positive signal for unblocking
- **Slovakia (Fico)** threatened to withdraw support over Druzhba oil pipeline dispute
- **Germany (Merz)** cast doubt on Ukraine joining by 2034 (Jan 2026 statement)
- EU Ambassador Katarína Mathernová stated (22 May 2026) that Orbán's fall created "fresh momentum" — but that "others were hiding behind him" and are now exposed

### Informal progress:

- Ukraine received **Draft Common Positions on clusters 1, 2, and 6** on 11 Dec 2025 — first time an official negotiating position was revealed to a candidate pre-opening
  - Ukraine has pushed for phased integration into the Single Market before full membership
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## Moldova — Accession Status: Candidate Negotiating

- **Applied:** 3 March 2022
- **Candidate status granted:** 23 June 2022
- **Negotiations opened:** 25 June 2024
- **Screening completed:** 22 Sept 2025
- **Chapters opened:** 0 of 33

### Key developments:

- Target date of **2028** for EU accession — the most ambitious timeline of any candidate
  - Oct 2024 constitutional referendum: narrowly voted to amend constitution to include EU membership aim
  - Pro-European PAS party retained power in Sept 2025 parliamentary elections
  - Receiving €1.9 billion Growth Plan (2025-2027)
  - **Informal opening of all chapters began 17 March 2026** — to bypass Hungary's veto (before Orbán's fall)
  - **Challenge:** European Commission expressed concern over dismissal of National Bank governor Octavian Armaşu as a risk to governance
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## Georgia — Status: Frozen

**Status:** Candidate status granted Dec 2023, but **accession process is effectively frozen / suspended**

### Key events:

- "Foreign agents" law (passed by Georgian Dream 2024) — requiring NGOs and media to register as receiving foreign funding
- EU **de facto halted** Georgia's accession process on 9 July 2024
- EU halted all financial aid to the Georgian government (redirected to civil society) from 27 June 2024

- 2024 parliamentary elections disputed — European Parliament rejected results, called for re-run
  - **28 Nov 2024:** PM Kobakhidze announced Georgia **suspended EU accession negotiations until end of 2028**
  - Massive protests followed. Constitutional crisis: disputed presidential inauguration
  - **No screening has taken place. No chapters opened or closed.**
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## Western Balkans

### Montenegro — Most Advanced Candidate

- **Chapters opened:** 33/33 (100%) ☒
- **Chapters provisionally closed:** 14/33 (42.4%)
- **Earliest possible entry:** 2028
- **Key development (22 Apr 2026):** EU ambassadors approved creation of ad hoc working group for drafting Montenegro's accession treaty — a major milestone
- Commissioner Marta Kos stated Montenegro could complete negotiations by 2028
- 19 chapters remain to be closed
- Only candidate to have met interim benchmarks for Chapters 23 & 24 (judiciary, fundamental rights)
- Public support for EU membership: ~81%

### Serbia — Negotiating Since 2014

- **Chapters opened:** 22/34 (64.7%)
- **Chapters closed:** 2/34 (5.9%)
- **Earliest possible entry:** 2029-2030
- **No progress since December 2021** — negotiations stalled
- **Main blocks:** Kosovo recognition, democratic backsliding, failure to align with EU sanctions on Russia, media freedom
- Benchmarks met for opening 3 more chapters (10, 16, 19) in Dec 2024 but **postponed** due to conditionality
- **21 May 2026:** Serbia's parliament head Ana Brnabić accused EU of "double standards" — arguing Ukraine was fast-tracked while Serbia's decade-old talks stall

### Albania — Negotiating Since July 2022

- **Chapters opened:** 0/33 (screening completed Nov 2023)
- First chapters opened in Oct 2024
- Commissioner Kos suggested 2029 as possible accession date

- Main challenge: rule of law, organised crime, corruption

## North Macedonia — Negotiating Since July 2022

- **Chapters opened:** 0/33 (screening completed Dec 2023)
- **Key block:** Opening of Fundamentals cluster conditional on constitutional amendment recognising **Bulgarian minority** — Bulgarian veto
- No progress on this amendment as of May 2026
- Name dispute (with Greece) resolved 2018-19 but bilateral issues continue to block

## Bosnia and Herzegovina — Candidate (Not Yet Negotiating)

- Candidate status granted Dec 2022
- March 2024: European Council granted **conditional approval** for opening negotiations
- But negotiations framework **has NOT been adopted**
- **Blocks:** Republika Srpska (Milorad Dodik) has obstructed EU path — in Jan 2025 stated he would "seriously reconsider" EU path and prefers secession
- Four cantons blocked Growth Plan reform package in July 2024
- Still needs: approved reform package, national programme for EU law adoption, chief negotiator appointment

## Kosovo — Applicant / Potential Candidate

- **Not yet candidate status**
  - **Blocked by:** Five EU member states (Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Romania, Slovakia) do not recognise Kosovo's independence
  - No progress expected until recognition issue resolved
  - EU-facilitated Belgrade-Pristina dialogue ongoing but stalled
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## Enlargement Reform Debates

### Orbán's Fall (April 2026) — Game Changer

- The single biggest political shift in EU enlargement
- Péter Magyar's win removed Hungary's chief obstructionist

- EU Ambassador Mathernová (22 May 2026): others were "hiding behind him" and are now exposed
- EU sanctions on Israeli settlers previously blocked by Orbán now proceeding
- Frozen EU funds for Hungary likely to be unblocked under Magyar

## Gradual Integration / "Phasing-In"

- New enlargement methodology (2020) divides 35 chapters into 6 clusters — Fundamentals opened first and closed last
- Commission exploring "gradual integration" — allowing candidates partial access to EU policies (Single Market areas, research programmes) before full membership
- Ukraine pushing hardest for this approach

## Internal EU Reform First?

- Debate between "enlarge before reforming" vs "reform institutions before enlarging"
- A larger EU would require changes to voting weights (QMV), budget contributions, structural funds allocation
- The 2030 target (Charles Michel at Bled Forum) seen as aspirational for the first ready candidates

## Serbia's "Double Standards" Complaint

- Brnabić's accusation reflects growing Serbian frustration
- Ukraine's fast-track (application to negotiations in <2.5 years) compared to Western Balkans' decade+
- Serbia argues it is being punished for its friendly stance toward Russia rather than actual backsliding

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