OESTERREICHISCHE NATIONALBANK
EUROSYSTEM

OeNB Policy Brief 2026/6
14 pages

EU enlargement back in the spotlight

Since its foundation, the European Union has grown from 6 founding countries to 27 members, and its population has expanded from around 170 million to around 450 million. After a prolonged period without new accessions, discussions about a next enlargement round are gaining momentum. New accessions would provide the chance to spur convergence, stability and prosperity in Europe and strengthen the EU's geopolitical position. But enlargement also comes with challenges and raises concerns among the people living in the EU-27. This OeNB Policy Brief aims to address these issues by explaining the current state of affairs, introducing the candidates for accession and assessing the impact of further EU enlargement.

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Publication

2 September 2026

Montenegro aims to become the 28th EU member in 2028

Accession negotiations with Montenegro are advancing, legal and institutional reforms have progressed. It is now key that reforms are implemented properly.

A larger EU brings advantages

Both EU newcomers and long-standing members generally benefit from an enlarged Union. Key advantages include access to larger markets, increased financial support for the acceding countries and strengthened geopolitical leverage for Europe.

Enlargement raises concerns that must be addressed

People are mainly worried about the financial costs of EU enlargement, employment effects, migration and increasing disparities in a larger EU. These concerns must be taken seriously. Some stem from insufficient information, others require transitory arrangements or consideration in EU-wide policy making.

1 Summary

EU enlargement is back in the spotlight, bringing both opportunities and challenges to current members and newcomers. The group of potential new EU members is very diverse: They vary in economic size, development levels, stage of accession and alignment with EU standards. The most likely next entrants are very small economies with limited economic impact but geopolitical relevance for the EU.

Public support for EU enlargement varies widely: In the Western Balkans, a majority of the population approves of joining the EU (on average 64%), with support being strongest in Albania and lowest in Serbia. In the EU-27, on average 56% of inhabitants favour further enlargement. People in Austria are among the most sceptical, driven by concerns about costs for public finances, employment and wages, migration and increasing regional disparities in the EU.

In the 2004/2007 Eastern enlargement, transition periods for the opening of EU labour markets to new members were agreed. Thus, the immediate impact on wages and employment in most old EU members was modest. Current Western Balkan aspirants have much smaller populations than the 2004/2007 newcomers. Moreover, their citizens have shown declining emigration intentions over time and the countries face increasing labour shortages at home.

While current EU candidates have larger income gaps than the 2004/2007 entrants, past enlargements demonstrate that new members can gradually close this gap through productivity gains, capital inflows, structural funds and institutional reform.

Future enlargements differ from past accessions: The Southeastern European accession economies are less integrated in value chains, show weaker governance and look back on a longer accession process featuring staged integration in some areas. The EU remains essential for them as a reform anchor and a major economic partner.

2 EU enlargement: good to know

The European Union has evolved over seven decades from 6 founding members to 27 member states today, with new countries joining nearly every decade up to Croatia's accession in 2013. Since then, more than ten years have passed without new entries while the EU’s “waiting room” is filling up fast. The road to EU accession is lengthy – applicants must adopt the full EU legal framework, the acquis communautaire, through reform negotiations with the European Commission. The current applicants’ progress towards EU membership varies significantly: Some of them started the accession process as long as 20 years ago (North Macedonia), some interrupted (Iceland) or suspended (Georgia) it or did not manage to obtain candidate status (Kosovo) while still others started late but have been moving along quickly (Moldova).

In general, the EU accession process works as follows: First, a country submits a formal application for membership. Then, the European Commission presents its recommendations for further steps. Next, all EU members must decide unanimously to grant the country candidate status. In a separate step, after previously agreed conditions are met, EU member states must agree unanimously to open accession negotiations. Next, they must agree on the negotiating framework. Once all these agreements have been reached, negotiations can formally start. They are traditionally structured in more than 30 policy areas called chapters. Under the new framework introduced in 2020, these chapters are grouped into six thematic clusters. Cluster 1 summarizes the so-called fundamentals – including, inter alia, judiciary and fundamental rights, justice, freedom and security, and public procurement. The EU pursues a "fundamentals first" approach: Negotiations on Cluster 1 are always opened first and closed last. As a result of successful negotiations, the candidate country implements reforms and adopts EU laws and standards. When agreement has been reached on all chapters, the European Commission issues an opinion on the candidate country's readiness to become an EU member. Based on this opinion, the EU member states must decide unanimously on the admission of the new member state. At this stage, also the European Parliament has to give its approval. Finally, all EU member states and the candidate country sign and ratify the accession treaty.

3 Who wants to join the EU?

Let us briefly introduce the countries in the waiting room (table 1). Montenegro and Albania are currently furthest along in the negotiation process. Both countries show a strong determination to conclude negotiations quickly. Montenegro plans to close all chapters by the end of this year, and the accession treaty is already being drafted. Reform progress is visible and has been acknowledged by the European Commission. Attention is now shifting towards the implementation of reforms, especially in areas such as rule of law, fight against corruption, fundamental rights and justice reform. Another key area of negotiations is the environmental chapter, where the gap to EU standards is still large. All of the above are also the most crucial issues in negotiations with Albania, the second candidate for which all chapters are now open for negotiations. Yet, alignment with the acquis communautaire is considerably lower in Albania than in Montenegro.

The remaining Western Balkan economies face rather diverse issues on their way to EU membership. Former frontrunner North Macedonia is locked in bilateral issues with two neighbouring countries, which are hindering the start of negotiations. While the name dispute with Greece was solved successfully in 2019, the historical nationality conflict with Bulgaria re-intensified in 2020 and would require constitutional amendments to recognize a Bulgarian minority in North Macedonia. Politically, this is not an option at present. Serbia also shows a high degree of alignment with EU law. An extensive analysis by Dabrowski and Louro (2026) reveals that both North Macedonia and Serbia overall show a higher degree of legal and regulatory alignment with the EU than Albania. Given Serbia's political and geopolitical orientation, however, rapid EU accession is unlikely at present despite the fact that 22 negotiation chapters have been opened and 2 provisionally closed.

A more recent applicant, Moldova, shows very fast progress in aligning with EU standards. Dabrowski and Louro (2026) find that, starting from a low level, the country has reached an intermediate level of preparedness in terms of alignment with EU laws and standards. The negotiation phase started when Cluster 1 was opened in mid-June 2026, at the same time as with Ukraine. Ukraine had applied for EU membership at the same time as Moldova, in June 2022. In contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina faces a standstill: It has so far reached a considerably lower level of institutional and legal readiness, according to Dabrowski and Louro (2026), and therefore struggles to meet several preconditions. As a result, negotiations have not started since the time when the country received candidate status in late 2022 and the opening of accession negotiations was approved in spring 2024. While Kosovo shows some progress and a clear pro-EU commitment, it has not yet been granted EU candidate status. More recently, political uncertainty has led to reform delays. Finally, the accession process of Georgia was frozen before accession negotiations even started as the current government is disconnecting from a pro-European orientation. The situation is similar for Türkiye, whose negotiations were started already in 2005 but have in fact come to a standstill as reforms are backsliding.

Table 1

Key indicators of (potential) candiate countries

	Population in 2025 (million) (% of EU total)	Candidate country since/ start of negotiations in	Status of negotiations[1]
Albania	2.36 (0.53)	2014/2022	All chapters opened by December 2025, of which 3 chapters provisionally closed
Bosnia and Herzegovina	3.54 (0.78)	2022/2024	-
Kosovo	1.77 (0.39)	Potential candidate	-
Montenegro	0.62 (0.14)	2010/2012	All chapters opened, of which 18 provisionally closed; offical target to become the 28th EU member in 2028
North Macedonia	1.82 (0.40)	2005/2022	Completion of the screening process in 2023
Serbia	6.57 (1.46)	2012/2014	22 chapters opened of which 2 provisionally closed; since 2020 negotiations under revised methodology
Moldova	2.42 (0.54)	2022/2024	Cluster 1 and Cluster 6 opened
Ukraine	41.0 (9.10)	2022/2024	Cluster 1 and Cluster 6 opened
Türkiye	85.66 (19.01)	1999/2005	16 chapters opened, of which 1 provisionally closed; negotiations effectively at a standstill since 2018 due to continuing backsliding in reforms in key areas
Georgia	3.70 (0.82)	2023/-	De facto halt of accession process since June 2024 due to government's actions jeopardising Georgia's European path

[1] Since 2020, under the revised enlargement methodology, the 33 negotiation chapters have been grouped into six thematic clusters (Fundamentals; Internal Market; Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth; Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity; Resources and Agriculture and Cohesion; External Relations). Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) is key to progress in negotiating. No other cluster can be opened before Cluster 1 is opened and no cluster can be closed before Cluster 1 is closed. Candidates that started negotiating before the new methodology was implemented continue negotiating under the old methodology.

Source: European Commission, Eurostat.

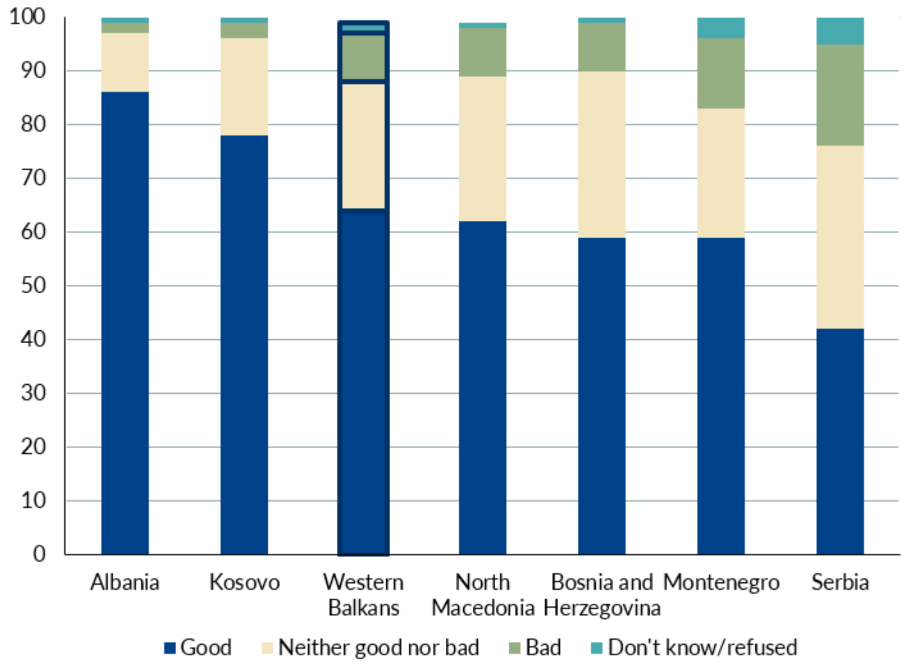
4 What do people think about EU enlargement?

To find out about people's attitude towards the accession of new members to the EU, we draw on data from different sources: the RegionalCooperationCouncil and the OeNB Euro Survey for survey data on the Western Balkans, and the European Commission's Eurobarometer for survey data on the EU and Austria in particular. Data from the RegionalCooperationCouncil on the support of EU membership in the (potential) candidate countries in the Western Balkans show that, on average, 64% of citizens in the Western Balkans think that EU membership would be good for their countries. The positive attitude towards EU membership is highest in Albania (86%) and Kosovo (78%). In Serbia, only 42% of respondents think that EU membership would be good for their country.

Chart 1

Do you think that EU membership would be good, neither good nor bad, or bad?

% of all respondents



Source: RegionalCooperationCouncil (2025), Balkan Public Barometer.

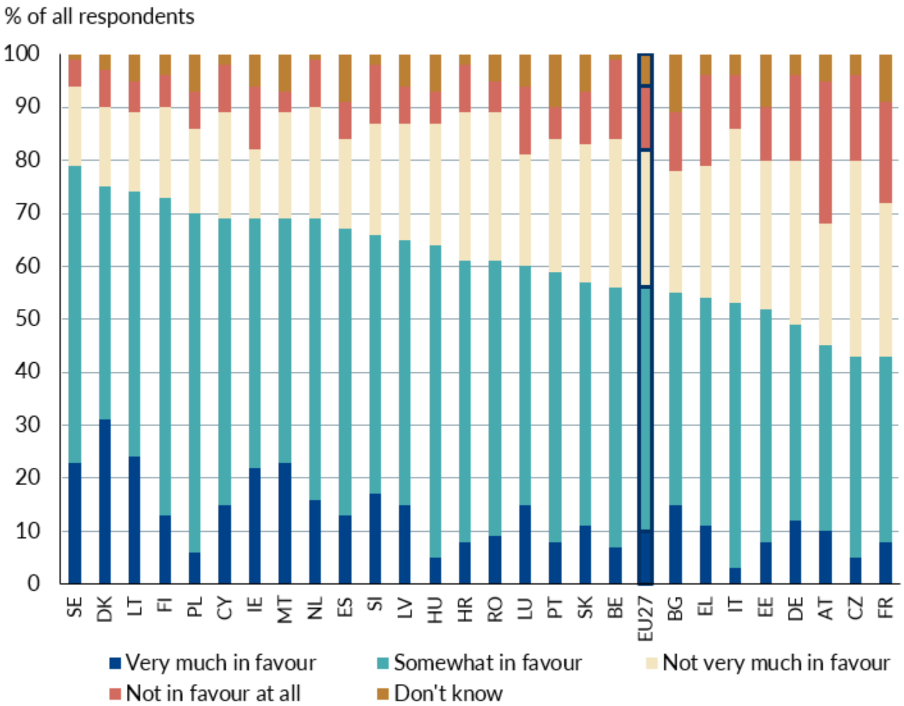
In the OeNB Euro Survey, we ask people in four Western Balkan countries when they expect their country to join the EU. In late 2025, 50% of those who said they expected their country to join the EU at some stage said they expected this to happen within the next five years (Albania), seven years (Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia) and eight years (Serbia). Yet, in Serbia, only a slight majority believes that the country will join the EU at all, with 45% of respondents answering that they think their country will never join. This share was only slightly lower in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in North Macedonia, at around 42%, and much lower in Albania (17%). A number of respondents did not have any expectations regarding EU membership, with around 15% in Albania and Serbia and about 20% in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in North Macedonia stating that they did not know.

Changes in expectations over time clearly show how the pace of a country's enlargement process shapes people's expectations. In Albania, for example, the share of people who expect that their country will join the EU within the next five years increased notably from 16% before Cluster 1 was opened to as much as 53% after this milestone had been reached. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the share of respondents who expected their country never to join the EU dropped temporarily after candidate status had been granted but increased again later as this step was not followed by further progress and negotiations did not begin. The situation in North Macedonia is most striking: Once the issue about the country's official name was solved in 2019, the share of persons who never expected their country to join the EU almost halved, coming to 13%, and the share of persons expecting EU membership within the next five years rose from 25% to 40%. As negotiations ground to a halt again, the share of EU sceptics rose rapidly to more than 40% in 2024 while the share of respondents who expected their country to join the EU within five years dropped to a low of 9% before recovering again somewhat to 17% in 2025.

Turning to people in the EU, we find that enlargement is perceived positively by a majority, according to the latest Eurobarometer survey (European Commission, 2025). 56% of respondents in the 27 member states said they were very much or somewhat in favour of further EU enlargement, while 26% said they were not very much in favour. Austria stands out as one of the most sceptical EU member states in this respect. In fact, in no other EU country people are as strongly opposed to future EU enlargement as in Austria. Only 45% of respondents in Austria said they were clearly in favour and 23% said they were not very much in favour of enlargement. 27% opposed enlargement outright – a resistance level that exceeds the EU average of 12%. Generally, opinions differ somewhat with regard to individual accession countries.

Chart 2

Support for further EU enlargement by current EU member states



Source: European Commisson (2025), Eurobarometer.

The survey results for Austria stand in contrast to the supportive political stance that Austrian governments have adopted over the years. Austria has been a supporter of the gradual integration approach, a step-by-step EU policy intended to enhance European prosperity, security and stability by bringing tangible benefits to citizens in the candidate countries and thus building resilience to external influence and threats. The Friends of the Western Balkans, an informal group of seven countries that Austria launched in 2023, is an initiative that supports the Western Balkans on their way to EU membership.

So what are people in Austria worried about? The Eurobarometer reveals that Austrians' lack of enthusiasm for future EU expansion is driven by a mix of economic, political and demographic concerns. Data show that 54% of respondents in Austria are worried about the financial costs of enlargement. 48% fear a negative impact on employment and wages and 47% are concerned about uncontrolled migration.

Further, 46% of respondents in Austria fear an increase in economic and financial disparity between EU countries and individual regions (European Commission, 2025). In the following, we will focus on these concerns in more detail.

5 How much does enlargement cost EU tax payers?

The two countries that could be ready to join the EU within the next few years are Montenegro and Albania. Given their small size, their economic impact on the EU would be modest: Montenegro's population accounts for 0.14% and Albania's for 0.53%. Even when considering all Western Balkan countries and Moldova together, they would add only a relatively small fraction to the EU's current population (4.2%). By comparison, in 2004, the accession of eight new CESEE countries (Czechia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia) increased the EU's population by around 19%. In 2007, Bulgaria and Romania contributed an additional 6%. In 2013, Croatia's impact was minimal, adding less than 1% to the EU's overall population. Ukraine and Türkiye would make a greater contribution (9% and 19%, respectively) while the additional effect of Georgia's accession on EU population figures would be negligible.

In short, most of the future accession countries are very small in size compared to the EU. But they are much poorer (chart 4). Does this mean they would receive large funds from the EU budget and thus generate high costs for current members? Darvas and Mejino-Lopez (2024) estimated the effect on the current EU budget of a hypothetical enlargement round comprising nine new members (including Kosovo, excluding Türkiye). They assume that the current EU budget rules remain unchanged apart from the upper limits on EU spending which, however, are part of regular negotiations. They find that – if everything else remained unchanged – the EU budget would increase from 1.12% of EU GDP to 1.23% overall. Distribution of cohesion funding would be most affected, and some countries – Spain, Italy, Hungary, Portugal and Romania – would face lower funding. At the same time, funding for neighbourhood policies would decrease as well, thus cushioning the overall impact on the EU budget. The potential EU newcomers are already receiving pre-accession funding from the EU budget. As EU members, the new entrants would be entitled to more funds than under current pre-accession funding. Cohesion funds are capped at 2.3% of GDP, however. Given their small economic size, the Western Balkans, Georgia and Moldova in sum would be entitled to 12% of today's EU cohesion budget. While Ukraine is considerably larger, its GDP is very low, thus limiting the amounts of cohesion funds the country could access to less than what Italy or Spain receive and roughly half of Poland's share (Rubio et al., 2026).

To put this in concrete figures: According to the European Commission (2026), Montenegro will receive EUR 3.2 billion in the 2028–2034 financing period, assuming that Montenegro joins in 2028. In relative terms, it would receive EU funding of around 5.6% of its own GDP each year. This funding would amount to 0.16% of the total EU budget over the seven years of the financing period.

Most probably, all current EU aspirants would be net recipients of EU funds. This would mean that other net recipients would receive slightly lower net transfers. For net payers, their contributions to the EU budget would theoretically rise, on average, by an additional 0.13% of their GDP. However, these figures are based on the current EU budget rules and rather represent an upper bound for net payers' additional contributions, which would be subject to negotiations (Darvas and Mejino-Lopez, 2024).[1] The additional burden that would arise for net payers in the assumed enlargement round of nine new members is quite comparable to that recorded in the first Eastern enlargement round in 2004. According to the European Commission (2006), the contribution of old EU member states to new members at that time amounted to 0.1% of their GDP.

We must bear in mind that fiscal costs do not reflect the full economic picture. The national budgets of all EU members will benefit from enlargement through different channels, e.g. a larger European market that generates opportunities for businesses. This, in turn, will increase exports, investment returns and tax revenues in the old member states. Moreover, firms throughout Europe will also benefit from participating in EU-funded programmes in the new member states (Darvas and Mejino-Lopez, 2024).

Without going into too much detail, let us briefly point to some studies that assess the macroeconomic effects that EU integration and the 2004 Eastern enlargement had on Austria. All of them agree that Austria benefited greatly from EU accession. Detailed quantitative estimates differ widely, ranging from almost 29% (Breuss, 2016) to 8% (Felbermayr et al., 2018) of GDP growth during the first 20 years of EU membership. In various studies, Breuss (2016, 2019, 2020 and 2022) estimates that the 2004 (and 2007) EU enlargement resulted in additional GDP growth in Austria of between 0.2% and 0.3% per annum, adding another 5% to Austria's cumulated GDP growth between 2004 and 2022.

6 Will EU enlargement have noticeable effects on labour markets? And what about migration?

A major concern for people in current EU member states is the free movement of citizens within the EU and the right work in any EU country without work permit – a core principle of the EU. We know from the results of the OeNB Euro Survey that labour migration is the dominant motive for outward migration in the Western Balkans. In view of EU enlargement, people in the old member states fear that citizens from poorer new member states might take their jobs. These fears were particularly strong during the first round of Eastern enlargement in 2004. As a result of this round, EU population grew by one-quarter. In contrast, the Western Balkans, Moldova and Georgia would add some 5% to the current EU population, Ukraine another 9% and Türkiye 19%.

Studies on the labour market effects of the 2004/2007 Eastern enlargement find relatively little effects on wages and employment in the old EU members, despite increased migration (see Landesmann et al., 2008). Overall, labour markets in the EU have become more efficient as the mobility of workers – especially of young and well-educated persons from new EU member states – increased, making the labour force more responsive to economic shocks (Kahanec, 2015; Kahanec and Zimmermann, 2016). Labour markets in the newly acceding countries of that round improved only slowly, as high productivity gains led to a growth in unemployment in the first years upon EU accession. Yet, wages were catching up fast and, with some delay, job creation gathered momentum and unemployment rates came down. Today, unemployment is often lower in these countries than in Western Europe. In recent years, Czechia for instance has recorded the lowest unemployment rate in the EU.

[1] Currently, a major reform of the EU budget is being discussed, which will change the distribution of funds in such a way that any enlargement would not affect the amount of funds allocated to current members in the 2028–2034 financing period. Further, transition periods would be implemented before new members are given full access to funds.

Labour markets in today's Southeastern European candidate countries are generally characterized by relatively high unemployment rates and relatively low employment rates compared to the EU – despite significant improvements in recent years. Notably, the informal sector is a major issue in these economies. The shadow economy is difficult to measure and estimates sometimes vary significantly. It can be assumed that the informal sector is more than three times larger in the Western Balkans than in Austria, accounting for around 30% of official GDP. Estimates are even higher for Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine. A particularly striking feature is that current EU aspirants face a labour market paradox where rising labour shortages – a phenomenon not seen in the acceding countries of 2004/2007 – coexist with weak labour market performance. Another key challenge in these countries is the job-quality mismatch: Their labour markets are particularly unattractive for educated workers, which fuels outmigration (World Bank Group, 2025).

Iara et al. (2008) report that the number of nationals in the old EU-15 that came from the new EU members of the 2004/2007 rounds rose from 840,000 to 1.86 million between 2003 and 2007, which equalled 0.5% of the EU-15 population. Most of these people moved to the UK and Ireland as many other countries – including Austria and Germany – had imposed restrictive transitional rules. Nevertheless, Austria received inflows of commuters from neighbouring countries. The number of people from the new member states who were working in Austria rose by 44% between 2000 and 2007, mostly driven by a strong increase in the number of persons from Slovakia and Hungary seeking work in border regions to their countries.

Yet, we also observe that migration is not always a one-way street. Again, we can draw on data from the OeNB Euro Survey that show that around 10% to 15% of respondents have lived abroad for some time. Of these persons, an average of 30% said that they intended to move abroad again. This share is substantially higher in this group than among persons who have never lived in another country (chart 3, left-hand panel). Over the period from 2018 to 2024, the share of respondents that said they had migration intentions fell from an average of around 15% of all respondents to 7%.

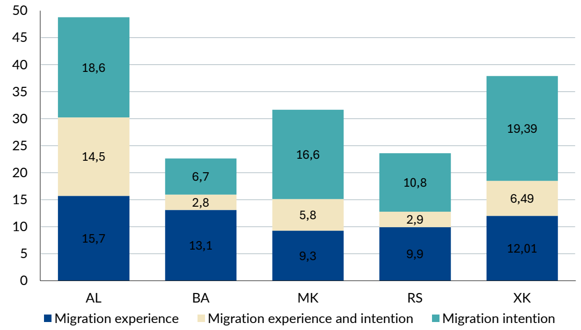
The OeNB Euro Survey further collects information on the reasons behind respondents' intentions to move abroad. People said they wanted to emigrate primarily for economic reasons: About 50% cited higher wages and better labour market prospects as their primary motives (see also Landesmann and Mara, 2021; Ayerst et al., 2025). Around 25% cited better living conditions, e.g. health care systems. Finally, other important motives were providing financial support for their families, followed by seeking education abroad (chart 3, right-hand panel).

Chart 3

Western Balkans: attitudes towards migration

Share of respondents with migration experience or intention

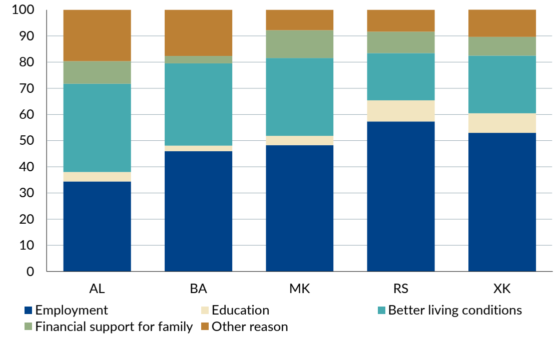
% of all respondents



Note: Data are weighted.
Source: OeNB Euro Survey, wave 2024; Macroeconomic and Financial Survey in Kosovo, wave 2025.

Reasons for migration plans

% of respondents with migration intention



Note: Data are weighted.
Source: OeNB Euro Survey, wave 2024; Macroeconomic and Financial Survey in Kosovo, wave 2025.

As labour shortages are on the rise in all EU member states, attracting appropriately skilled – and lower-skilled – labour becomes a policy priority. Unlike in the past, labour shortage has possibly caused a shift: In some cases, workers from the candidate countries are even actively recruited, particularly in lower-skilled sectors. Wage differentials undoubtedly make this task easier for many current member states, and countries like Germany and Austria will remain particularly attractive destinations for foreign labour.

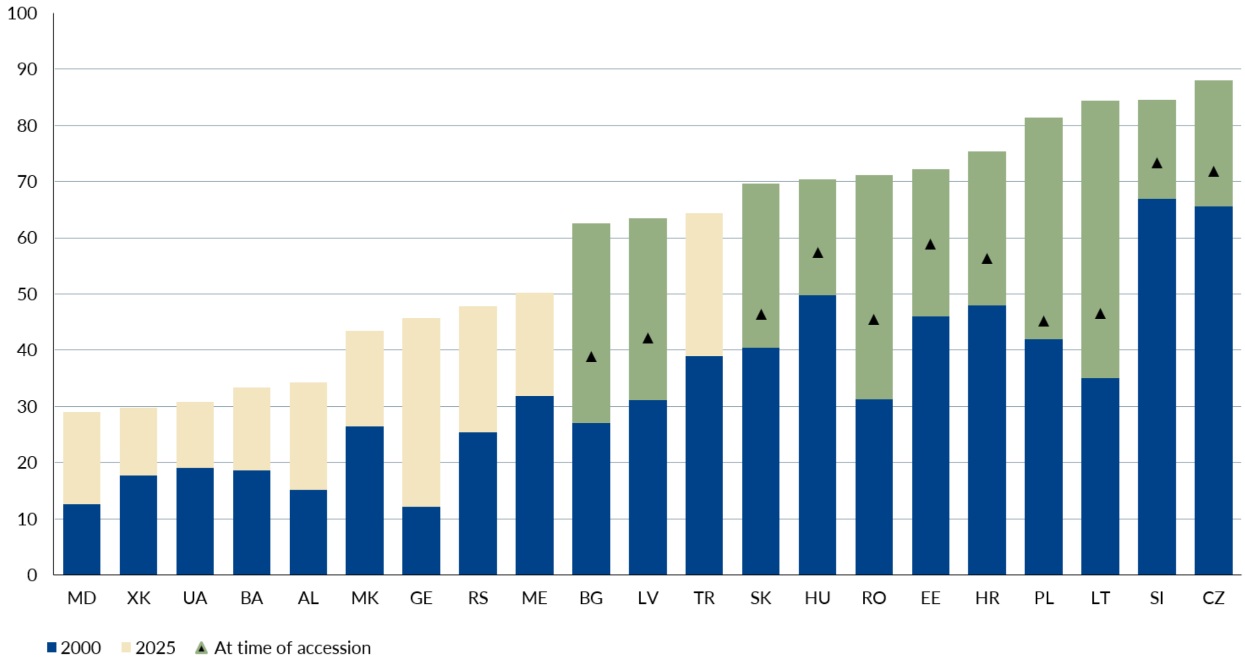
7 Economic and financial disparities between EU countries and regions: Will we drift further apart instead of growing closer together?

A comparison of GDP-per-capita levels of the current EU members with those of the Western Balkans and Moldova reveals significant differences which are indeed more pronounced, on average, than in the 2004/2007 enlargement rounds, even if the picture was mixed then and is again so now. On average, the GDP-per-capita level of new EU members in 2004/2007 was roughly half the average of that of the EU-27. The average per capita income of the Western Balkans and Moldova is below 40% of today's EU average. The most advanced new members back in 2004, Slovenia and Czechia, entered the EU with a GDP-per-capita level of around 70% of the EU average, followed by Estonia and Hungary at a level of close to 60%. Today's most advanced accession candidate in Southeastern Europe, Montenegro, has a GDP-per-capita level of 50% of the EU average. Similarly, Serbia records a level of 48%. North Macedonia's slightly lower level of 44% compares to the income gap of Lithuania, Slovakia and Poland when they joined the EU. By contrast, Romania and Bulgaria had notably lower GDP-per-capita levels than the EU average in 2007, comparable to current levels in Albania and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (around 35% of the EU average). Kosovo and Moldova lag even further behind at around 30% of the EU average.

Chart 4

Convergence of GDP per capita (at PPP)

Index, EU-27 = 100



Source: IMF.

In short, the countries expected to join the EU next will be poorer than those of the last enlargement rounds. However, experience from these past rounds has shown that new EU members gradually close their income gaps with the EU on the back of productivity gains and capital inflows but also through the support provided by structural funds, via access to the single market and institutional reforms (IMF, 2024). The average income gap of the 2004/2007 accession countries has narrowed from about 50% to 20% today. Per capita income in Czechia, Slovenia and Lithuania has reached around 85% of the EU average. EU membership is likely to benefit future accession countries equally well and will accelerate the convergence of incomes.

These figures alone do not prove that EU membership was responsible for this catching-up performance. In order to assess the effect of EU membership, we quantify the potential economic gains from EU accession for European transition economies in a simple econometric model.[2] According to our results, EU membership implies GDP-per-capita levels that are around 18.5% higher than in countries that remain outside the EU. The estimated accession-related GDP growth bonus comes on top of the broader catching-up process that often sets in among poorer economies. We also find that countries that started from lower income levels tend to grow more quickly over time, irrespective of EU membership.

The magnitude of our estimate of 18.5% of additional growth due to EU membership is broadly consistent with findings presented in the literature. Beyer et al. (2026) find that GDP-per-capita gains for the 2004 entrants have averaged 27% since their accession to the EU. Campos et al. (2019) estimate that Eastern enlargement contributed around 15% to GDP per capita in the accession countries.

[2] Our sample comprises Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. We look at their economic performance measured by their per capita GDP over the period from 1995 to 2024. The model takes account of differences across countries, such as institutions or historical development levels, as well as of external shocks that are common to all countries considered.

Chupilkin et al. (2025) argue that the accession-related growth bonus plays a vital role in convergence with Germany. Hagemejer et al. (2021) estimate that EU accession was associated with GDP-per-capita gains of at least 30% in five of the ten new member states in CESEE that they analyse. There is strong evidence that EU membership supports convergence and thus reduces economic disparities.

8 Conclusions

Attention has once again turned to EU enlargement and to the opportunities and challenges it presents to the EU as a whole and to EU newcomers. Current EU aspirants are a widely heterogeneous group of countries: They vary in economic size, development levels and their progress in accession negotiations and alignment with EU standards. The countries most likely to join the EU next would be very small economies whose economic impact on the EU might be limited but whose geopolitical significance could be substantial. The accession of new member states could demonstrate that the EU remains an attractive and expanding community.

Yet scepticism about further EU enlargement persists among current EU countries, particularly in Austria. This scepticism goes hand in hand with a striking information gap: Nearly 60% of Austrians report that they feel poorly informed about the present enlargement process, while only 8% feel well informed. Past rounds of enlargement – especially in 2004 – proved that Austria benefited significantly from the accession of new member states.

It goes without saying that the current enlargement round differs fundamentally from previous rounds. It would not be a “big bang” accession like in the past. Instead, we see much longer pre-accession periods and staged integration across specific areas. However, the 2004 newcomers arrived with better access to markets and finance, a more educated labour force and stronger growth and productivity gains (IMF, 2024). By contrast, today’s aspirants are less integrated into value chains and score comparably low on both education indicators and the World Bank’s governance indicators.

There is no doubt that the EU remains essential for the new aspirants – as a credible external reform anchor, a financial supporter and a major trading partner. Yet, its influence has weakened in some countries as alternative powers have gained ground. Especially against this background, the current reform momentum needs to be taken seriously and, if access is granted, the small economies seeking EU membership need to be integrated with ample room to enable a successful catching-up process.

The authors thank Nico Petz (OeNB) for providing econometric estimates on the gains of accession. Research assistance by Miles Harjes during his internship at the OeNB is gratefully acknowledged.

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ISSN 3061-2012 (online)