

Keeping the European Momentum

A Pan-European Study on EU
Enlargement and Deepening

Peter Hefe



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Credits

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party, dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies
Rue du Commerce 20 Brussels, BE 1000

For more information, please visit www.martenscentre.eu

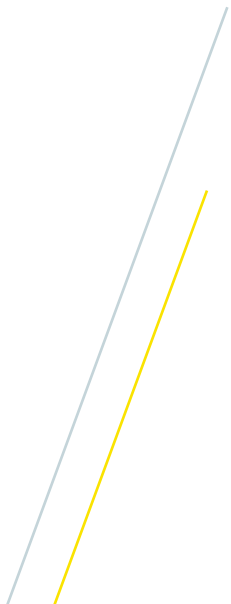
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INTRODUCTION

The European Union is at a crossroads, both in terms of its internal constitutional reform and the integration of new member states. Hence, deepening and enlargement are inseparably linked together. Finding solutions to both challenges will be the major task of the new legislative term of the European Parliament and Commission from 2024 to 2029. As the official think tank of the European People's Party (EPP), the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies develops policy options for European decision-makers and opinion leaders from a centre-right perspective. Having been the driving force behind past European integration and enlargement processes since the creation of the European Economic Community in 1957, the political family of the EPP feels a distinct obligation to shape the decisive next steps and lay a successful path ahead for a next-generation European Union.

While the last major round of new EU memberships in 2004 happened under comparatively stable regional and geopolitical circumstances, the current situation couldn't be worse. Russia's war against Ukraine, the Middle East again on the brink of a regional conflict, and an assertively rising China are only three major destabilising and adverse developments working against the core ideas of Europe as an anchor of peace, stability, and well-being.

Enlarging the European Union to gain more weight as a geopolitical actor and stabilise the endangered periphery by integrating neighbouring nations into the framework of the European Union is often mentioned as an argument in favour of opening "the club" to new

members. At the same time, the rise of Eurosceptic parties shows a growing discontent with the Union's current functioning and is blurring the prospect of an accelerated and successful enlargement process.

In the context of the European Election 2024 and the constitution of a New European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen, the Martens Centre commissioned Leuven-based Ipsos to conduct a data-driven survey across all EU-27 member states. To better understand EU citizens' attitudes and their views towards the enlargement and deepening of the European Union, the research project looked more closely at the following dimensions:

- What are the conceptions of "Europe" across different socio-demographic groups and countries?
- How do citizens of the EU member states resonate with the perspective of a larger and deeper Union, mainly when talking about the potential accession of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and the Western Balkan countries?
- What are the attitudes of different socio-political groups towards various models of integrating those candidate members in the EU?
- What has to be changed within the European treaties to make any further enlargement and deepening into a success story, and not a failure for the Union?



MAIN FINDINGS

2.1 Looking Back Forward: Visions on the Future European Union

Citizens' visions of a future European Union are largely influenced by their past experiences. While "unionisation" in many policy fields made remarkable progress in recent years, this process also fuelled increasing Euroscepticism in almost all member countries. The empirical data clearly show politically highly divided societies along regional as well as socio-demographic lines, such as age or education. The general outlook on the future of Europe is rather optimistic, with three-thirds of the population seeing Europe as an essential part of their identity. However, a closer look at the data also shows that a significant part of citizens (41%) was not satisfied with the way the Union currently works. Even among the founding members of the Union, such as France, Germany, or Belgium, the outlook for Europe looks rather reluctant, in particular with the prospect of enlargement. The biggest support on the contrary can be found in the Central and Eastern European countries.

This bias consistently mirrors in their views on the future path of the European Union. There is a clear division between those who support a (differentiated) deepening of the Union, e.g., by strengthening decisionmaking on the EU level; and those who like to maintain or even reduce the Union's competencies, including enhanced use of opting-out for individual member states (50%). A Europe of different speeds and topic-specific flexible alliances more closely reflects the vision of a majority of European citizens. The lines between the two camps are significantly

drawn along the socio-economic status, age, location, and political values, as can be seen already in the national and European election results during the last few years. Better knowledge about the EU and a more optimistic economic outlook significantly raises support across all regions.

Expectations for different policy areas are a relevant factor leading to slightly different results. They clearly hint at where the highest potential and most promising fields of further integration lay and in which EU citizens are willing to give more extensive competencies to the supranational level. Security and defence, environment and climate change, migration, and, partially, energy policy are seen as areas in which the EU should take a more influential governance role. However, in none of these fields would a majority of citizens pledge for exclusively delegating it to the European Union.

2.2 Opening the Club: Who is Next in Line?

The European Union started the latest rounds of enlargement with promises made to the Western Balkan Countries already in 2014. This movement only gained momentum after the opening of accession talks with the latest round in 2023 for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. However, in contrast to this official timeline of negotiations, citizens prioritise Ukraine joining the EU, followed only then by the accession of Western Balkan countries.

An slight majority (51%) doesn't see Türkiye as a future member of the EU. Given the country's



geopolitical importance, a different approach to closer cooperation has to be found. Similarly, support for Armenian and Belarusian accession has been low, countries whose accession is somewhat hypothetical anyhow due to their current political situations.

To better understand these attitudes, we asked citizens about their perceptions and experiences with the last four rounds of EU enlargements: in 1995 with Austria, Finland, and Sweden; 2004 with Czechia, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia; 2007 with Bulgaria and Romania; and 2013 with Croatia. Two factors mainly influenced the changing perception towards different rounds. First, deeper experience and awareness of EU affairs by citizens led to a significantly more positive attitude towards further accession. Secondly, the benefits and burdens that came along with the different phases of accession have changed and were quite different for various parts of society. Freedom of movement, economic growth, modernisation, and the increasing role of the EU as a geopolitical player were mentioned in the first place. The countries of the first, and partially the second round, were considered as “net-contributors”. In the second and third rounds, strengthening democratic processes and providing stability to the Central and Eastern European Countries were considered as major benefits of accession. However, in the opinion of many, these achievements came with negative consequences, which blurred the benefits and advancements of integration. Uncontrolled migration and lack of border control, economic imbalances, and the need for increased transfer of EU funds to compensate for regional inequality have become major concerns and explain a large part of the declining support by EU citizens. In addition, the dissatisfaction with the EU also stems from two processes, which are beyond the EU’s control: domestic politics and the scapegoating of Brussels

for every failure of local politicians. More recently, Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns against the European Union tried to weaken citizens’ positive impression of their country’s European membership.

2.3 The Next Rounds: What is in it for “us” and for “them”?

These mixed experiences with past enlargement rounds explain the huge concerns and reluctance of European citizens when it comes to the further opening of the European Union. European policymakers must acknowledge this gap between their political rationales and narratives, and those of European citizens. The constant decline of support since 2004 reflects the negative and (often) unsolved impacts of enlargement on citizens’ daily lives. Official narratives for enlargement, such as the EU gaining more geopolitical influence, stabilising internal democratic stability and rule of law order, or economic benefits, do not necessarily go in line with citizens’ understanding and expectations. Further, citizens strongly demand that the criteria set up by the Copenhagen European Council in 2003 (Copenhagen criteria) have to be fulfilled by the candidate nations prior to accession.

There is an overwhelming consensus (91%) that internal political stability, good governance, expressed by democratic procedures and institutions, independent justice, and the rule of law matter first and foremost. The high demand for gender equality and the protection of minorities indicates a solid adherence to the fundamental values and norms of the Union. Economic stability ranked second with 85%. In contrast to official voices about the Judeo-Christian roots and heritage of the European Union, this factor is of relatively lower importance for citizens. Surprisingly, belonging to a geographical space (“Europe”) matters more.



These criteria fit very much with the expected benefits for the current EU members. The triad of peace and stability, economic welfare, and new business opportunities, combined with higher social and environmental standards, is mentioned by a significant number of citizens as a precondition for accepting new members. However, when it comes to the reallocation of EU funds, e.g., in agriculture or extended defence obligations, support significantly decreased, even among those who show a high and continued esteem of Europe.

What do EU citizens see as benefits for the potential “new” club members? Support for the transformation of the political and legal systems of the candidates is seen as key (61%). Equally important is economic integration into the Single Market, both for goods and services and, with some reservations, labour force mobility. These two dimensions are widely shared across the Union. When it comes, however, to extended military support and access to EU funding, the opinions are far more critical and show huge geographical differences. Defence assistance gains a majority only in CEE countries due to the immediate threats of Russian expansionism. Contrary to this, extended financial help, for instance, receives extremely low values in austerity-oriented countries, such as the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

2.4 Beauty Contest: Who should join the Club?

With the latest invitation to three more nations in December 2023 (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia), the number of candidate countries has now grown to nine. Their size, socio-economic conditions, status of governance reforms and geopolitical importance couldn't be any more different. Aside from analysing the general attitude of EU citizens towards enlargement, we asked, therefore, about the impacts of each candidate on the Union. None of the countries obtained

significant positive support, with Ukraine performing best at 41%; in most cases, indifference or outright rejection was sometimes near two-thirds.

Ukraine

Geographical proximity to Ukraine helped to increase support for accession (41%), reflecting the security concerns of Russia's neighbourhood, seconded by economic considerations. But, the fear of negative impacts was dominant, both for the EU members and Ukraine itself. Political orientation significantly influenced the decision, but even among those who typically rally behind the European flag, no majority could be found.

Moldova and Georgia

The support for Moldova to join the EU is even lower (34%), reflecting equally security and economic concerns. A clear east-west divide and a weaker socio-economic status of the respondents closely correlate with lower support. Geographical proximity has a slightly positive influence, most significantly in neighbouring Romania. A similar picture can be found for Georgia (32%).

Western Balkans

The opinions on the case of the Western Balkans show a slightly better picture (35%). Scepticism about that region is deeply rooted mainly in North and Western European countries. Security and economic concerns, as well as fears about negative impacts on the efficient functioning of the EU, dominated those unfavourable attitudes. Whatever socio-demographic indicators one might take into account, support never gained more than a good third.



2.5 Having a Voice in Enlargement

With the evolution of the European Union towards a supranational institution, more transparency and better participation in decision-making processes have become major grievances for European citizens. Several initiatives, such as the Conference on the Future of Europe in 2022, have developed a set of ideas for closing the “democratic deficit”, but are still waiting for implementation. Other attempts, such as the never fully implemented principle of a “Spitzenkandidat”, didn’t fulfil people’s expectations in terms of more direct, democratic influence.

For the moment, any fundamental decisions affecting the functioning of the Union, such as the enlargement of the Union, would still require unanimity by all member states after mainly inter-governmental negotiations. In this case, several countries will definitely go for national referenda before any ratification processes on enlargement. The research clearly shows that a significant majority of European citizens (65%) are in favour of having a direct say on which countries should be allowed to join the Union. A closer look at the data, however, shows that this longing for a direct saying doesn’t necessarily mean a proenlargement attitude. It is also seen as an instrument by Eurosceptic forces to block any further extension of the Union.

The wish for extended representation in the process of enlargement and deepening hints at a structural deficit in the current European constitution. The request for more influence is strong throughout all socio-demographic groups, with a slightly higher demand for “voice” among highly educated citizens. This deficit already showed when we asked about the available information related to enlargement. The overwhelming majority of citizens (78%) express a strong demand for more information on the benefits and risks of the candidate countries. For now,

enlargement is seen either as a technocratic project of experts or a must out of a political “confession”. The communication strategies of European institutions, including political parties, need substantial upgrading.

2.6 Communication and Action: Strategies for Pro-European Political Forces

Despite a slightly higher sceptic attitude of centre-right citizens towards enlargement, the main political responsibility for a successful enlargement process lays with centrist political parties. They obtained the majority in the decisive political bodies (Parliament, Commission and Council) during the last elections and are responsible for paving the roads to accession in a much more concrete way than has been the case so far.

Next to new legal and procedural initiatives, most of these steps will happen within the existing treaty framework. Political leaders and parties must convince European citizens of the benefits of bringing in new members. To find starting points for improved communication and concrete political actions, we profiled European citizens into five groups (“segmentation”), ranging from highly “enthusiastic” towards enlargement and deepening towards outright “Eurosceptic” ones.

Each of the groups has to be addressed differently and requires tailored policy measures.

1. In dealing with the “Enthusiasts” (25 %), engaging them in the promotion of a more united and stronger Union is key. Future-oriented policies, e.g., in the field of climate change and common values/rule-of-law, sell most to those people and provide a strong sense of commitment to an extended European



project. Even if a majority of these citizens are not core voters of the centre-right parties, joint political objectives, such as a renewed narrative of sustainable development, can bridge the gap and make them part of a larger enlargement coalition.

2. Constitutional reforms of the European Union, improving its internal functioning and redefining the relationship between the EU and the member states, are the core concerns of the “Enlargement conditionalists” (24%). This group is more reluctant to enlargement despite their overall support for European integration. Those citizens, usually being better off socio-economically, represent a significant part of the voters of centrist political parties. They demand enhanced efficiency of the current Union in the sense of a subsidiarity-oriented internal reform a precondition before accepting new members.
3. Being in a less favourable socio-economic situation, “Ambivalent Critics” represent around a fifth of European citizens (23%). They are also affiliated to a large extent with centre/centre-right parties. In addition to internal reforms of the EU, improving their economic outlook (jobs and housing) is a priority. These priorities also explain their demand for strict criteria and cautious preparation of potential candidates to avoid additional burdens for the European Union to the detriment of the current member states and their (vulnerable) citizens.
4. The remaining two groups – the “Disillusioned sceptics” and the “hardline sceptics” – account for roughly 30% of all European citizens. To different degrees, the current political system of the European Union is rejected due to a lack of benefits. However, their voters still represent an important part even of moderate conservative parties. Here, as well, internal reforms of the EU matter most, e.g., in terms of border security, access to infrastructure or equal living opportunities. Directly addressing enlargement would have alienated them even more

from the European idea. Only to a minor extent is their opposition driven by pure ideological reasons.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Peace, democratic stability, and economic prosperity are considered the key promises of the European project. Making these objectives and the advantages the Union provides more tangible to the daily reality of European citizens is crucial.
- 2) Identifying and promoting the benefits, as well as transparently discussing the burdens of the enlargement to current EU citizens and those of candidate nations, must be the guideline of very target group-specific communication by the EU institutions and political parties.
- 3) Gradual integration provides a more flexible approach than simply following the legal procedures of the Copenhagen process. It also makes communication easier as immediate achievements become visible.
- 4) The quality of the reforms in the candidate countries is a relevant factor in the support of EU citizens. Rule of law, anti-corruption and democratic procedures rank highest. Lowering these criteria to speed up accession is not an option and could significantly weaken the support of EU citizens for accession.
- 5) Without significantly improving in the participation of European citizens and enhancing the functioning of the EU, any further round of enlargement will be difficult to achieve. It will not only endanger enlargement but also affect the current state of the European project.
- 6) The existential threat to the European way of life by Russia's war against Ukraine provides a unique window of opportunity to speed up ongoing accession negotiations. The danger of losing this momentum and creating a massive backlash among the candidate nations and EU citizens alike is high.
- 7) A new framework for future bilateral relations with Türkiye has to be negotiated in parallel with the enlargement process. Further alienation of this country has to be avoided, as negative spill-over effects, e.g., in the Balkans or the Black Sea region, would be the consequence.
- 8) The constitutional principle of subsidiarity best reflects the vision of the majority of European citizens for the future of the Union. Continued accumulation of further competencies at the supranational level without a redelegation of power to lower entities will only strengthen outright Eurosceptic forces.



FIGURES





Fig. 1
Identification with
Europe

	City/town/village	Country	EU
% Who identified to a great extent/some extent			
Age			
18-24	74%	78%	75%
25-34	78%	82%	76%
35-44	80%	84%	76%
45-54	80%	85%	74%
55-64	82%	87%	76%
65+	85%	91%	78%
Urbanity/rurality			
Rural area/village	78%	83%	71%
Small or medium-sized town	79%	85%	75%
Large town or city	85%	87%	81%
Education			
Low	78%	81%	67%
Mid	81%	85%	74%
High	81%	87%	80%
Ease of managing financially			
Very/fairly difficult	79%	82%	71%
Very/fairly easy	83%	88%	81%
Political values			
Right/Centre-right	82%	86%	67%
Centre	80%	86%	76%
Centre-left/Left	80%	84%	81%
No clear orientation	82%	87%	75%

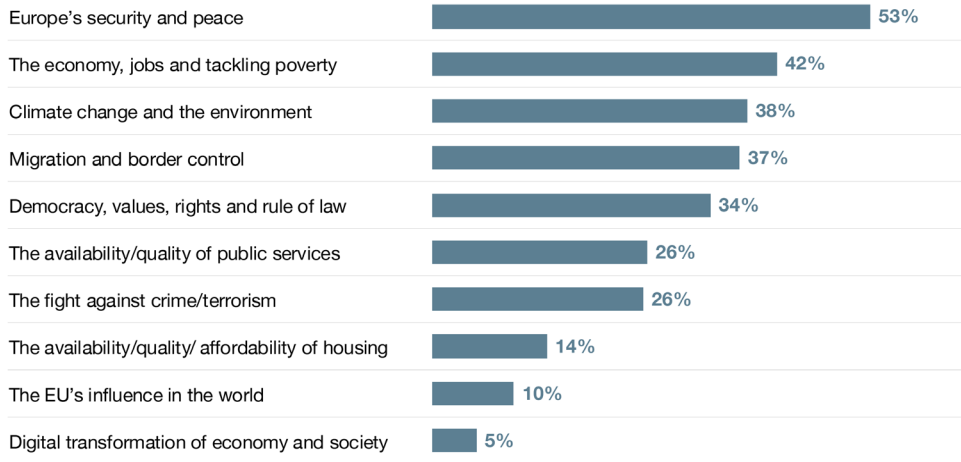


Fig. 2
Outlook on the Future
of Europe

Base: N=25844 (All respondents)

Question: Which of the following issues do you think are the most important for the future of Europe?

Fig. 3
Perceptions of past
enlargement rounds

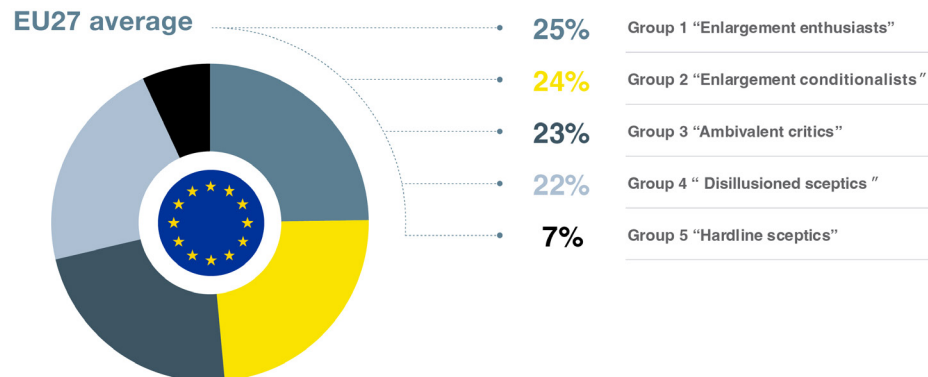
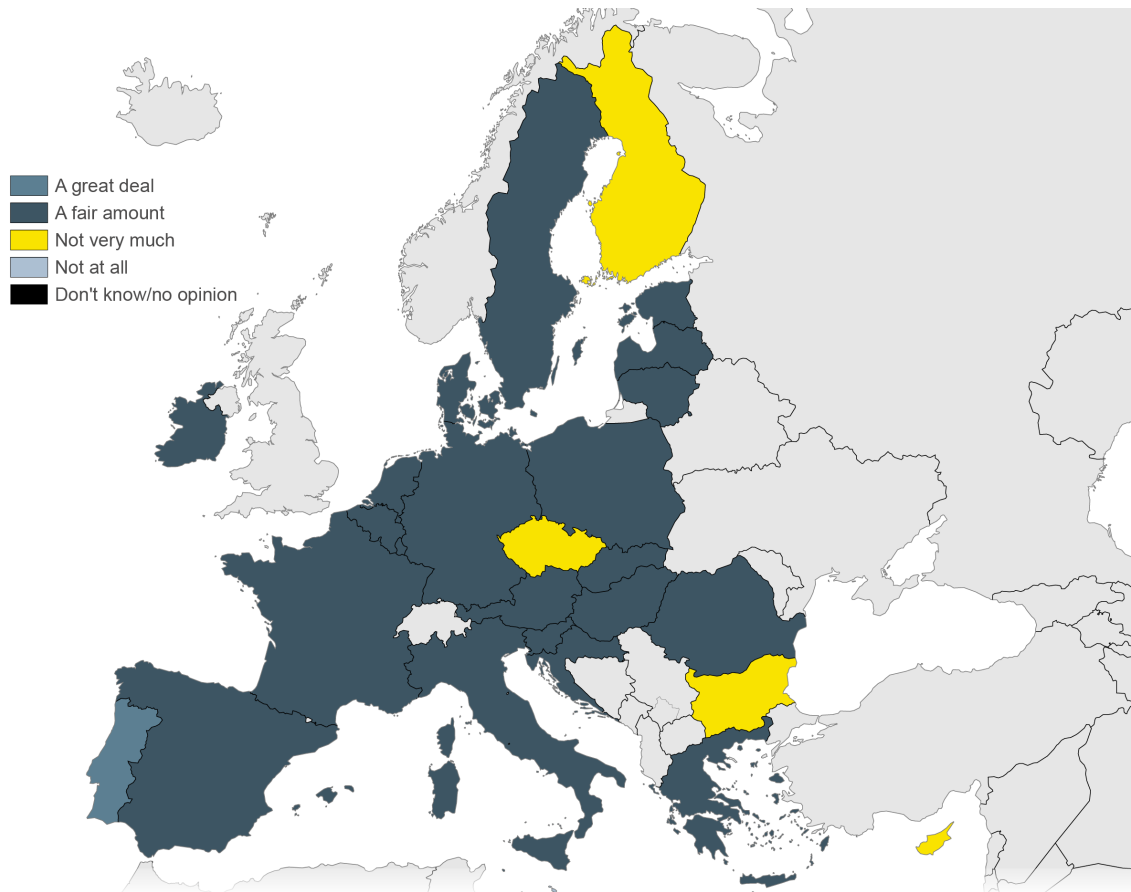




Fig. 4
Perceived Benefit of Accessing to the European Union



Base: N=25844 (All respondents)

Administrative boundaries: © EuroGeographics © UN-FAO © Turkstat
Cartography: Eurostat – IMAGE, 08/2024

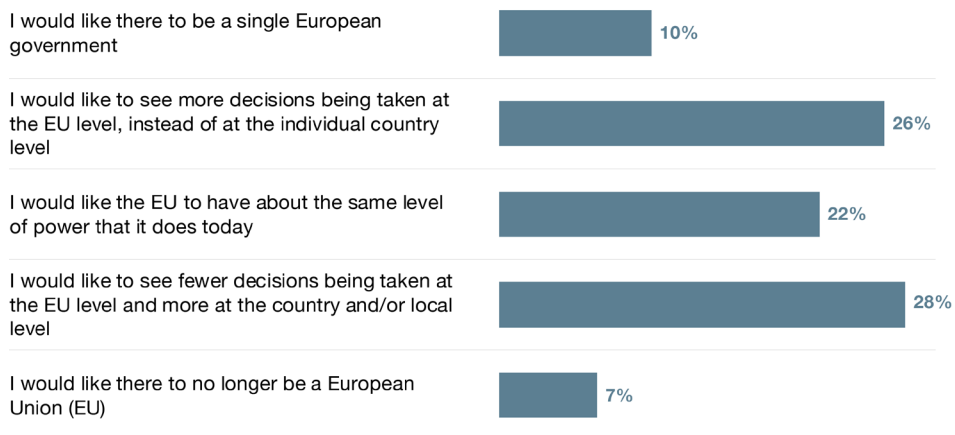
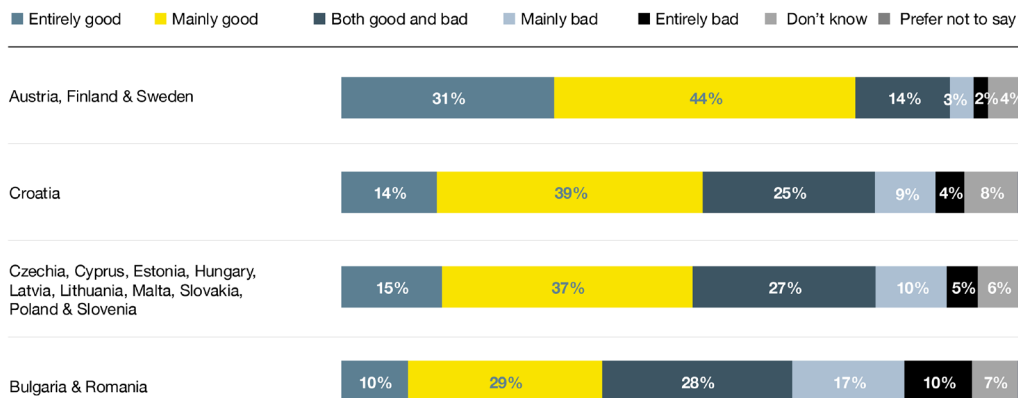


Fig. 5
Vision for the European Union in 2030

Base: N=25844 (All respondents)

Question: Which of the following most closely reflects your view of how the European Union (EU) should look by 2030? By 2030...

Fig. 6
Past Rounds of Enlargement



Base: N=25844 (All respondents)

Question: Do you feel that these groups of countries joining the European Union (EU) was generally a good or a bad thing for the EU?

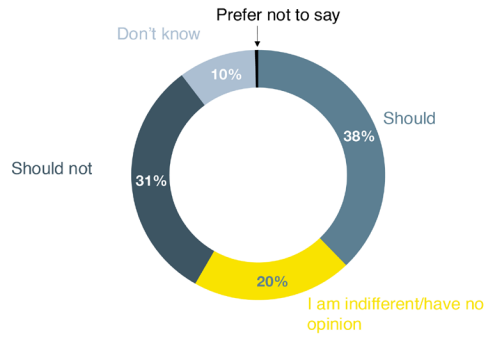
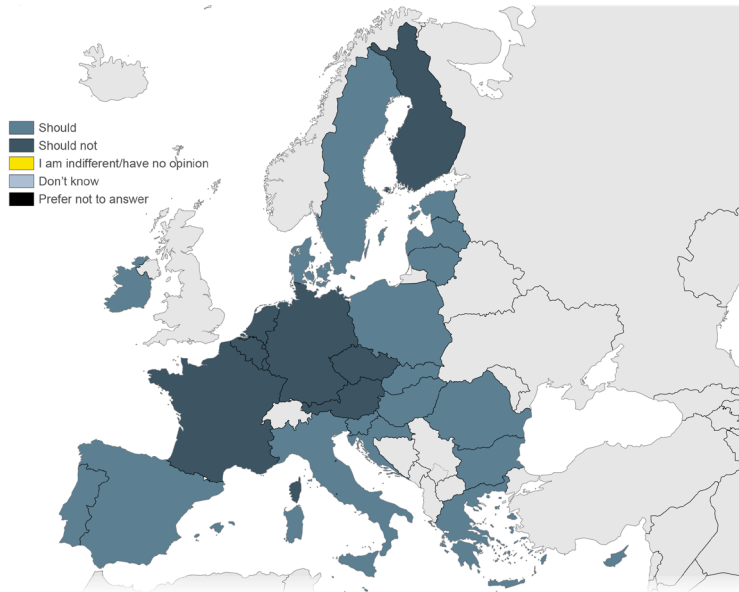


Fig. 7
Support for the
Enlargement of the
European Union

Base: N=25844 (All respondents)
Question: In general, do you think that the European Union (EU) should or should not be looking to add more member countries at this moment?



Base: N=25844 (All respondents)

Administrative boundaries: © EuroGeographics © UN-FAO © Turkstat
Cartography: Eurostat – IMAGE, 08/2024

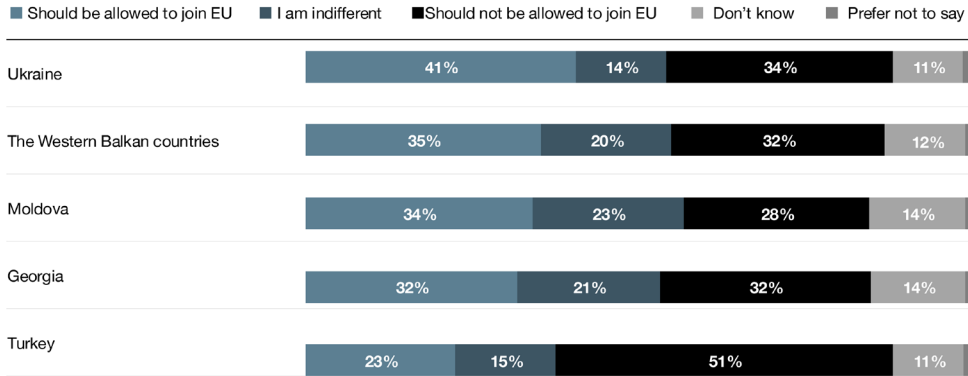
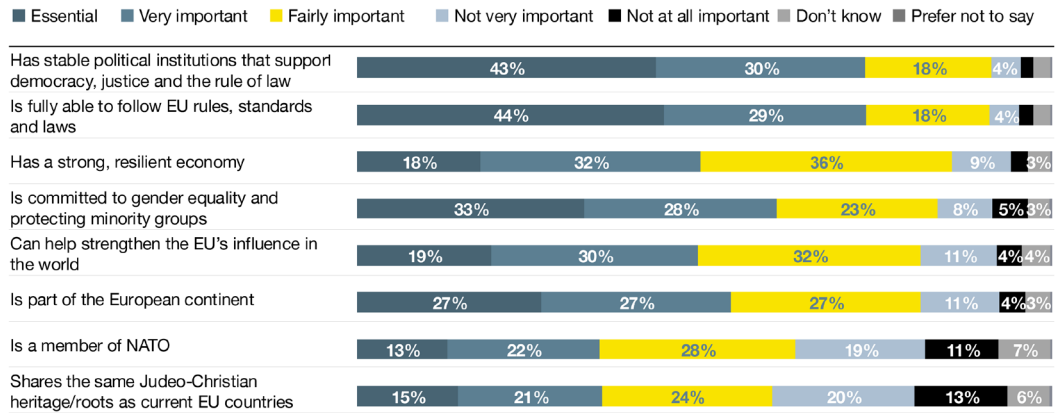


Fig. 8
Joining the European
Union

Base: N=25844 (All respondents)
Question: In your opinion, should these countries be allowed to join the EU, when they are ready?

Fig. 9
Criteria for
Membership



Base: N=25844 (All respondents)
Question: In your opinion, how important, if at all, should each of the following be when deciding if a country should be allowed to join the EU?

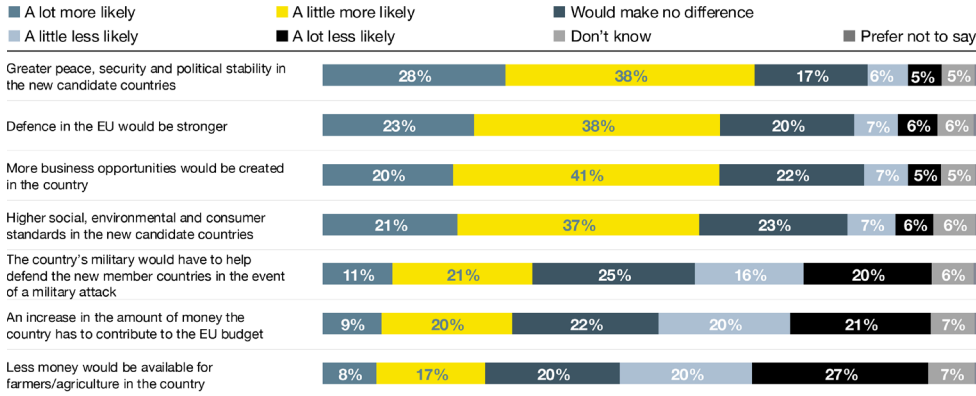
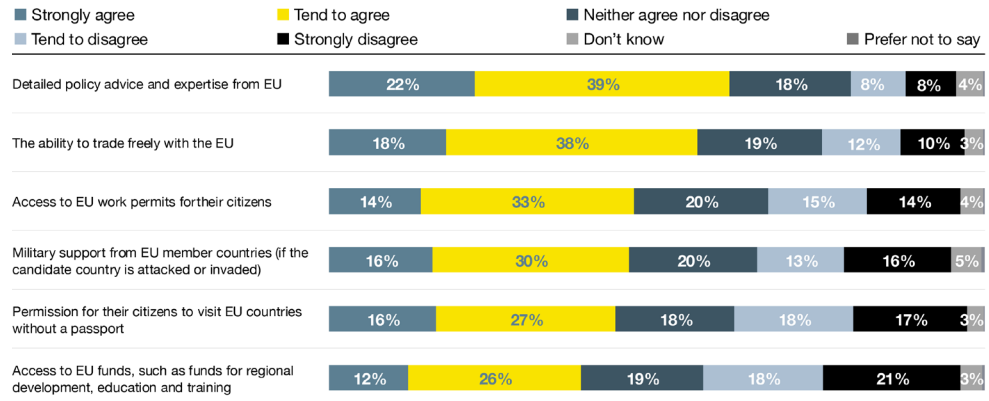


Fig. 10
Factors Influencing
Support

Base: N=25844 (All respondents)
Question: Would you be more or less likely to support candidate countries becoming members of the EU if you knew this would mean..

Fig. 11
Access to benefits
during the Accession
process



Base: N=25844 (All respondents)
Question: Do you agree or disagree that candidate countries should be able to start accessing the following types of benefits?

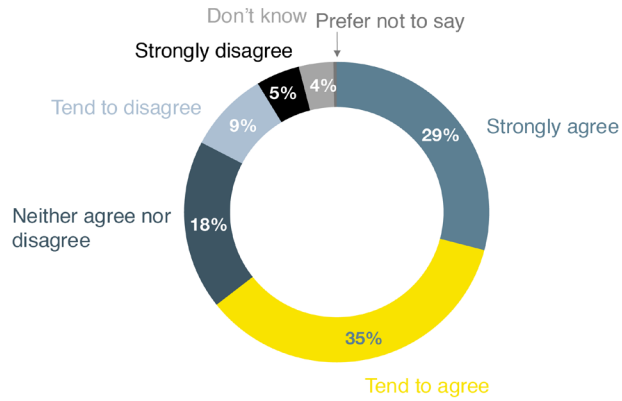
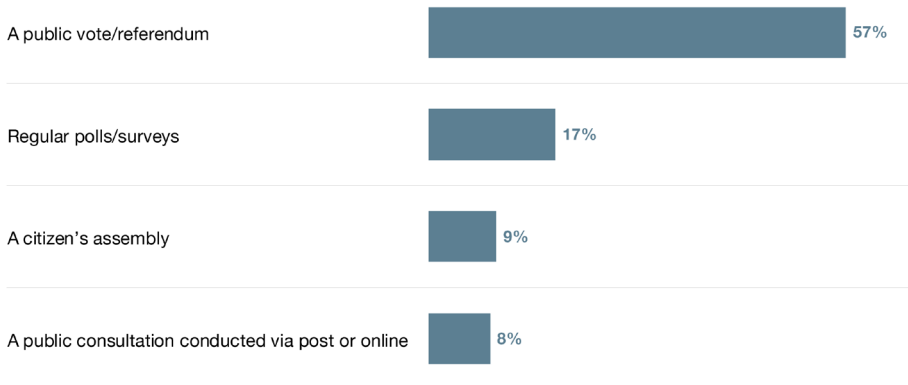


Fig.12
Involving Citizens in
the Enlargement
process

Base: N=25844 (All respondents)

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that EU citizens themselves should have a more direct say on which countries are allowed to join the EU?



Base: N=21138 (EU citizens should have a direct say on which countries should join EU)

Question: Which, if any, of the following would be the best way to let EU citizens have a more direct say on which countries should be able to join the EU?



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