

PARTNERSHIP FOR ENLARGEMENT: A NEW WAY TO INTEGRATE UKRAINE AND THE EU'S EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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SUMMARY

- Russia's war on Ukraine puts the entire future European order at risk. It is already forcing a profound reconsideration of the EU's and its neighbours' interests.
- To address this, the EU needs to devise a new approach to its neighbourhood, similar to the way in which it has rapidly enhanced its security and economic policies to respond to the threat.
- The EU should establish a Partnership for Enlargement that offers Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Western Balkans states concrete steps towards deeper integration – and a pathway to eventual membership.
- This new partnership should include three 'pillars': single market integration and the reconstruction of Ukraine; a reinforced commitment to energy security and climate transition; and stronger political cooperation in security matters.
- As countries with key interests in the Ukraine war, Germany and Poland should work particularly closely to drive this new project forward.

Introduction

Russia's war against Ukraine represents the greatest security threat to the European Union since the bloc's foundation. The response of the EU and NATO to Russia's aggression includes imposing economic sanctions, supplying arms to Ukraine, and giving political support to Kyiv. NATO is adapting to the new conditions and deploying additional forces on its eastern flank.

There is no doubt that, whatever the outcome of the hostilities, a return to the geopolitical status quo ante is inconceivable. This also applies to the EU's neighbourhood policy, especially with regard to its eastern neighbours. In response to Russia's attacks, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have applied for membership of the EU; they have voiced both their attachment to European values and their desire to leave the Russian sphere of influence permanently. Not only must the EU not leave these calls unanswered, its response also needs to rise to the transformed geopolitical situation. The interests not only of the countries applying for membership, but also the interests of the EU itself, should now be looked at afresh.

Russia's aggressive policy is directed against the entire European security order and therefore against the fundamental interests of the EU. This means that the question of integrating the EU's eastern neighbours is not solely about economic and social challenges. Their successful integration will be crucial to the entire future European order and the new self-identification of the EU as a geopolitical actor. This is rapidly becoming a priority for the EU's foreign policy.

The first test of the EU's ability to meet this challenge will be to respond formally to the membership applications. Ukraine has already completed the form required by EU procedures. The first steps are the European Commission's assessment and a decision by the European Council on whether to grant Ukraine candidate country status, which needs to be unanimous. In a situation where hostilities are ongoing and their outcome remains unknown, this decision will be mainly political and symbolic, but by no means insignificant for that. At the same time, the EU needs to start working on a post-war strategy, which cannot simply be an extension of the current Eastern Partnership or enlargement policies. Eastern European countries need a new offer, one that draws lessons from the mistakes of the past, takes into account the changed political context, and meets the requirements of post-war reconstruction in Ukraine.

The EU and its eastern neighbours: A stocktake

Since 2009, the EU's policy towards its eastern neighbours has been governed by the mechanisms and principles of the Eastern Partnership. It would be an oversimplification to regard the EU's relations

with its eastern neighbours as devoid of substance and the Eastern Partnership as a failure. After all – and this is by no means trivial – the EU has concluded association agreements with Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova and enabled visa-free travel for citizens of those countries. Such actions were far from foregone conclusions, given the considerable reticence of many member states to engage with these countries.

There is no doubt, however, that the Eastern Partnership has failed to achieve many of the objectives it set. Of course, much of this is to do with developments in the participating countries that, realistically speaking, the EU could do little prevent – such as Belarus’s slide into increasingly repressive autocracy. In any case, having created new ways to cooperate in the form of association agreements, an impression has emerged both in the EU and partner countries that the Eastern Partnership is more about administering relations between them than it is about any ambitious political project. The experience seems to have been that the EU would not present any new proposals or ideas, but instead concentrate on calling on the partner countries to implement the rules and regulations of the association agreements. These calls for reform were not wrong in themselves but they opened up no new prospects for closer cooperation.

Over the years there has been a lack of political impetus driving the Eastern Partnership, with only a few moments of optimism – and these largely resulted from developments in neighbouring countries rather than from EU initiatives. This includes occasions when pro-European forces have won electoral victories, as in Moldova in the last couple of years. After a period of growing indifference on the part of the EU, signs of ‘partnership fatigue’ began to appear, even in neighbouring countries that were genuinely friendly towards the EU. With the exception of some efforts to increase “resilience,” it has become clear that the EU has failed to create mechanisms – under the Eastern Partnership, via the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), or through other actions – that provide effective protection to vulnerable neighbours.

Moreover, the heterogeneity of the neighbourhood – to which the Eastern Partnership tried to respond with the principle of “differentiation” – resulted in a range of forms of interaction. Belarus dropped out of the Eastern Partnership, suspending its participation following EU sanctions related to the rigged presidential elections of August 2020, while Armenia and Azerbaijan have been content with their own special arrangements. In contrast, the three associated states of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia entered into intensive dialogue with the EU in pursuit of more ambitious aspirations. While the EU never formally renounced its explicit long-term goal of transforming neighbouring countries, “resilience” and “implementation” became the new leitmotifs of its actions, instead of the previously prioritised democratisation and transformation. Both these issues are certainly very important. Nevertheless, efforts to increase resilience and achieve better implementation of reforms alone will

not suffice to initiate deeper and more rapid Europeanisation of the EU's eastern neighbours.

More broadly, the EU has failed in recent years to rise to the challenge of offering its neighbours a new perspective – in whatever form – on their European aspirations. The EU has no visible and politically useful offer for those neighbours that want a stronger relationship with it.

In view of Russia's war in Ukraine and the security confrontation between the West and Russia, which is likely to continue for many years, the Eastern Partnership can no longer serve as the framework for the EU's approach to its eastern neighbours. The EU should now significantly increase its economic and political engagement with select states to its east, and make new commitments towards, and in cooperation with, neighbours interested in joining the bloc.

An offer fit for the times: The Partnership for Enlargement

It is important to say explicitly that the possible granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia would not rise to this new challenge. The truth is that having EU candidate status today has almost no practical significance. Such is the experience of the countries of the Western Balkans, which have been candidates for many years and have not sighted light at the tunnel for some time. The examples of Albania and North Macedonia are particularly pertinent. These countries were granted candidate status long ago, but, even after they met the necessary conditions, accession negotiations have still not begun. The decision to proceed depends on the member states and is hostage to political games. Moreover, the negotiation process itself is tedious and overly bureaucratic. Indeed, the demanding nature of the reforms required is for good reason. But, in practice, those EU countries that are critical of enlargement can – and do – use this stringency for their own ends.

This deep-seated scepticism of enlargement in many countries will not disappear any time soon, despite all the sympathy for Ukraine and other associated countries. Offering the three associated states the prospect of joining the EU would undoubtedly send a much-needed political signal. But such an offer should not remain an empty gesture. Fast-track integration would face serious obstacles – legal, political, and economic. It may mean abbreviating certain bureaucratic procedures. It would, however, be unrealistic to expect that it will lead to accelerated membership, with the omission or softening of important requirements both for the applicant countries and for the EU itself. This would be an empty promise, and betting on it would be a very short-sighted strategy.

So, while attention now turns to whether the EU will grant candidate status to the new applicants, or even open accession negotiations, it is crucial that the bloc in fact rejects this 'business as usual'

choice and adopts new goals that will enable much greater practical change. At the heart of this shift should be a proposal to significantly strengthen ties between the EU and Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, as well as the Balkans countries, in the – probably quite long – period before these countries join. This proposal should go beyond the framework set by the Eastern Partnership and association agreements. Although it cannot, for both political and formal reasons, prejudge the question of future membership, the EU needs to unequivocally support these countries and serve that goal. Such a Partnership for Enlargement would not be an alternative to enlargement policy, but would give it a new dynamic and anchor aspiring countries more firmly within the European community.

The three fundamental pillars of the Partnership for Enlargement should be accelerated integration into the single market, coupled with EU financial support; strengthened assistance for the climate and energy transitions; and building the foundations for cooperation in security and foreign policy. This new cooperation structure would be qualitatively new and would bring concrete benefits in the short term. It would also serve the purpose of moving the EU measurably closer to completing the strategic goal of enlargement. Furthermore, it would be useful in generating a new consensus on enlargement policy.

With such a framework available, in the knowledge that the enlargement process is not automatic, sceptical member state governments could more easily agree to a significant rapprochement of the eastern partners to the EU and to the opening up of the community. In turn, pro-enlargement countries would not perceive such an offer as an attempt to avoid greater responsibility towards the EU's pro-European neighbours. This would therefore lie somewhere between other proposed initiatives to create a kind of permanent replacement for countries as diverse as Turkey, Western Balkans states, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine – such as French president Emmanuel Macron's recent proposal for a "European Political Community" – and other ideas that are primarily concerned with streamlining the current approach to enlargement. This new formula would be more than just an "enhanced Eastern Partnership", and it would avoid the problems posed by ideas that envisage some kind of partial EU membership, which would require treaty changes.

At the same time, achieving clear and realistic benefits prior to full accession would avert the sort of frustration that has marked the EU enlargement process for Western Balkans applicant countries. This new enlargement and neighbourhood policy formula could also pull the Western Balkans candidate countries out of their stagnation – for which the inadequacy of the existing process is at least in part responsible. Of course, such a new EU offer would not arise in a vacuum. The reforms and objectives agreed so far by both sides, such as the implementation of association agreements, would remain in place. However, the new offer would provide a new path forward suitable to the current geopolitical challenge.

First pillar: Reconstruction and the single market

The first pillar of the new Partnership for Enlargement would offer the Balkans countries and the three associated states a new model to participate in the European single market. This would resemble the functioning of the European Economic Area (EEA), of which Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein are members alongside the EU member states. It would not, however, be an identical arrangement, due to the completely different nature of the countries under consideration.

As part of the new framework of the Partnership for Enlargement, the EU should immediately launch negotiations on accession to the single market under this new model. This would constitute an expression of the EU's strategic response to the European ambitions of its eastern neighbours, address the need for stability in these countries, and strengthen their socio-economic resilience.

Full participation in the single market in terms of the states accepting and taking part in the 'four freedoms' of people, goods, services, and capital would go beyond the framework of the current association agreements. The latter assume trade liberalisation and open up prospects for access to the single market in only 14 selected areas. The Partnership for Enlargement form of single market membership would provide the greatest possible integration with the EU in economic terms below the accession threshold. It would give participating countries the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the single market, but without the right to formally co-shape the integration agenda. It would therefore fulfil then European Commission president Romano Prodi's 2002 formula of "everything but institutions", helping solve the political problem within the EU of lack of consensus on admitting new members.

Such a concrete goal is achievable within the next decade. Exact timings would depend, of course, on the individual progress of each country; and the adjustments they would need to undergo would be far-reaching. But this model of single-market participation would give a new dynamic to EU politics, which association agreements and the current enlargement policy currently fail to guarantee.

As noted, such an offer cannot be a copy of the EEA. The “Norwegian model” is not adequate for the situation of eastern European countries for several reasons. Firstly, Norway is a rich country, which pays a membership fee in return for access to the single market and does not have to use support in the form of regional funds; cohesion policy is not part of the EEA, but Partnership for Enlargement states would need this sort of support. Secondly, the EEA does not include agricultural policy; agriculture is an important part of the economy of potential Partnership for Enlargement countries, while in Norway it is only a small proportion of the economy. Thirdly, unlike Norway and the other EEA countries, the countries of the Balkans and eastern Europe (especially Ukraine) will for a long time continue to serve as a source of cheap labour. In this respect they could become serious competitors in the single market, assuming that borders are fully opened to the movement of people. For these countries, this is currently one of the most challenging political barriers to accessing the EU labour market.

The Partnership for Enlargement model for participating in the single market (contained within the first pillar of the Partnership for Enlargement) would, however, go beyond the “Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement +” formula (trade liberalisation plus selective access to the single market) already made available to some neighbouring countries. It would include appropriately calibrated support mechanisms from the EU based on the “more for more” (more support for more reforms) principle related to the implementation of association agreements – and any further obligations necessary to achieve the ability to participate in the single market. Importantly, under the model, the states’ current level of development means they would need to be able to access the resources of the EU’s reformed cohesion policy (at the earliest from the new Multiannual Financial Framework 2028-2035). This would also distinguish it from the EEA.

There is no doubt that, after the end of hostilities, the EU and other international institutions will have to provide significant support to Ukraine to rebuild its economy and infrastructure. A clear perspective of full accession to the single market would therefore also promote the most effective possible use of the expected large-scale funding and support to reconstruct the country’s economy.

To supplement this, the EU should establish a special fund, which could draw on the experience of the bloc’s NextGenerationEU reconstruction fund and be based on common borrowing. It could be complemented by loans from the World Bank and support from the International Monetary Fund to

ensure the liquidity of the recovering Ukrainian state. The shape and size of such a fund will have to be commensurate with the scale of need, the extent of which is not yet known.

The disbursement of resources from such a fund – irrespective of their amount – would be an integral part of the new EU strategy towards Ukraine. Disbursement should be based on national integration plans to be drawn up by the partner countries. These plans would serve reconstruction and modernisation purposes and support the objective of the Partnership for Enlargement states joining the European single market under the first pillar model as soon as possible, as the first step towards future membership of the EU.

Second pillar: Energy security and the green transition

As part of stabilising its neighbourhood and supporting its pro-European neighbours, the EU should draw up the European Partnership for Enlargement in such a way that it helps partnership states strengthen their energy, economic, and political resilience. It should also integrate them as closely as possible into the EU's climate policy and action.

In recent years, Russia has continually tried to use its position as a major energy supplier to post-Soviet countries to make future sales conditional on their foreign policy orientation. This is exemplified by recent conflict between Russia and Moldova over gas imports and supply contracts, which in its latest form has been rumbling on since 2021. More broadly, Moscow has been trying to deepen this asymmetry and worked to remove important counterbalances to its dominance, by increasing its presence in, or control of, transit capacity and ownership structures. For example, to avoid using pipelines in Ukraine, Russia has pursued the construction of new pipelines such as Nord Stream I and II, and Turkish Stream and the Southern Gas Pipeline. Russia has also deepened its control over key pieces of infrastructure, such as Belarus's nuclear power plant in Astravets, which is mainly financed by Russian loans, as well as transit pipelines in Belarus, which are owned by Gazprom.

In response, countries in the region have tried to improve their energy infrastructure, diversify their gas imports, and undertake domestic reforms to improve the position of their energy sectors. Reforms include introducing important elements of EU energy market regulations such as the liberalisation of energy imports, unbundling transit operations, or (cautious and sometimes cancelled) price deregulations.

Ukraine claims that it has not imported gas directly from Russia since the middle of the last decade. Nevertheless, the EU's eastern neighbours remain vulnerable in terms of energy policy and security of supply, which leaves their flanks wide open for Russian destabilisation activities. It is therefore in the

strategic interest of the EU and potential Partnership for Enlargement states to strengthen and expand mutual ties in energy security.

At the same time, the countries of the EU's eastern neighbourhood face the challenge of transforming their energy systems and entire economies in the face of global and EU decarbonisation-orientated transition processes. In these countries, the share of renewable energy in electricity generation is low, the risk of energy poverty is high, and energy efficiency is weak, alongside other unfavourable conditions. They are already coming under pressure to more quickly develop a climate-orientated, sustainable energy economy: international commitments, such as those made under the Paris Climate Agreement are one factor, as are financial markets' increasing coolness towards fossil-fuel investments and growing interest in renewables. These countries' direct proximity to the EU and desire to cooperate more closely with the bloc is also an important strategic driver.

The EU's increased climate policy ambitions have a direct impact on neighbouring countries. The potential introduction of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) is of particular concern for them, as new levies on products produced without strict climate standards in countries such as Ukraine would apply to an important part of their exports to the EU and impact on their competitiveness. In Ukraine, 17 per cent of all exports could be affected, with different consequences in individual sectors. In the case of steel, 85 per cent of all exports to the EU would face levies under current conditions, while in the case of fertilisers it would be only 3.6 per cent. Current Eastern Partnership countries, including those states that have association agreements, therefore risk seeing their export opportunities decrease if they fail to quickly initiate reforms (or negotiate exemption rules with the EU).

The second pillar of the Partnership for Enlargement should thus give strategic importance to deepening cooperation on energy and climate policy.

European policymakers should understand this as a core policy issue that has knock-on effects in many other important areas. After all, effective climate and energy policies not only support the security and resilience of partner countries, but also contain the potential for technological innovation (not least through digitalisation), open up integration into the single market and energy market, create opportunities for trade and investment, and drive reforms in the economy as well as in government. Climate and energy policy also not only concerns the energy and industry sectors, but affects other aspects of economic, public, and private life; it impacts on transport, construction and housing, and agriculture, as well as public procurement practices, consumer behaviour, social policy, and more. Given that the EU's immediate neighbourhood faces challenges, especially in terms of carbon leakage and CBAM, how much the union can assist states here to adapt will be an important

test of how effective it is at pursuing its broader foreign policy efforts. The EU could help address this by (partially) extending the European Green Deal.

The climate and energy domain poses a number of challenges that demand the EU adopt an integrated approach, recognising and handling trade-offs and conflicting objectives. In anticipation of this, the EU, firstly, should seek to ensure that its climate policy aims to provide greater security of supply, especially for the countries to its east. This means that its policy should not impact negatively on these countries' (and its own) energy security during the decarbonisation transition process. Secondly, in the context of the green transition, the EU should define more ambitious carbon reduction targets for the Partnership for Enlargement countries as compared to the hitherto existing plans, while offering them additional financial support to help them go further.

The war in Ukraine has brought upheaval, but also new impulses for the EU's energy and climate policy, which will affect the bloc's neighbours, and not only Ukraine itself. The EU has set itself the goal of becoming largely independent of imports of Russian energy sources by the end of this decade. Its RePowerEU plan, adopted by the European Commission in May 2022, is a strategic diversification and modernisation programme for the EU and its member states. The communication on external engagement in energy, presented jointly by the European Commission and the high representative for foreign affairs and security policy, pays particular attention to the needs and opportunities for cooperation with other regions and partners around the world.

RePowerEU already floats the possibility of external partners being able to participate in an energy platform for the joint purchase of natural gas, liquefied natural gas, or hydrogen. The plan aims to help bring about the fast-track synchronisation of the electricity systems of Ukraine and Moldova, and further develop these to facilitate the trading of electricity. Transport infrastructure for moving gas from the EU to Ukraine and Moldova will also be further strengthened. Ukraine is to become part of one of the three planned import corridors for hydrogen. Additionally, within the framework of the Relief and Reconstruction Plan for Ukraine and the planned Reconstruction of Ukraine facility, the EU has earmarked funds to rebuild energy infrastructure. In this context, the EU has also declared its ambition to create a REPowerUkraine initiative, which aims to achieve energy independence by decarbonising the country.

All these actions can help significantly deepen the EU's cooperation with its immediate neighbours on energy and climate policy. However, the EU should treat these areas as a cross-cutting issue of strategic importance for European security, economies, and societies. The most far-reaching goal would be to bring Partnership for Enlargement countries to a position where they meet, or come very close to meeting, the core objectives of the EU energy-climate policy triangle: that is, significantly

improving their energy security, sustainability, and competitiveness. In particular, the aim of a reinforced energy and climate policy under the Partnership for Enlargement should be to bring states as close as possible to the objectives of the European Green Deal, particularly in aspects of energy security. Of course, partner countries would not have full access to EU funding.

More specifically, the second pillar of the Partnership for Enlargement should include four main components.

Firstly, the EU should take steps to integrate Partnership for Enlargement states into the EU energy union, in order to strengthen the energy security of both the EU and its partners. Such steps should include the EU organising a format for dialogue between the EU and Partnership for Enlargement participants on the planning and maintenance of energy infrastructure and market (such as by full or partial integration of partners into the structures of coordination bodies such as ACER, ENTSO-E, and ENTSO-G). The EU could also set up a regular dialogue on energy security with partner states at the ministerial level. In the framework of this format, the EU should consult on the adjustment processes sparked by its drive for independence from Russian energy sources with the eastern states and take account of their security of supply. The importance of such close coordination was on display in March 2022 when, in response to the war, Ukraine and Moldova synchronised their electricity systems with the Continental European Electricity Grid, disconnecting their electricity networks from Russia and Belarus. This step has created huge opportunities for the future integration of the energy sectors, but also an increased need for close cooperation.

When the war ends, Ukraine will have the chance to intensify its trade relations. To make this possible, infrastructure needs to be built (new high-voltage lines if possible) and general provisions for grid stability need to be put in place. There should also be a focus on the cyber-security of Ukraine's energy infrastructure, as this area has been the target of several Russia-attributed attacks in the past. In addition, solidarity clauses could be proposed between the EU and partner countries, or a partial extension of the principle of energy solidarity – which is binding within the EU and can oblige member states to take into account the energy security of other members when implementing energy related projects or decisions, and which implies certain aspects of mutual assistance in situations of crisis. However, such offers would have to be carefully examined as they would have implications for member states and would have to be credible.

Secondly, in addition to modernisation investments (such as in renewable energy sources and energy efficiency), the EU should also make available an element of targeted mitigation. This would help address the impact of reforms on particularly affected social groups (certainly not on the scale of the Just Transition Fund, but moving in that direction).

Thirdly, the EU should set up a multilateral climate community along the lines of the Energy Community, which would mean including EU members and interested third parties. This community would define the basis of EU law that the participants would have to adopt and implement. It would aim for the large-scale adoption of EU carbon reduction targets and pursue many of the goals of the European Green Deal. Participation in the climate community would be a prerequisite for access to the newly created climate fund. Alternatively, the EU's existing Energy Community could be transformed into a Climate and Energy Community.

Finally, this new offer would be complemented by a set of bilateral agreements between the EU and Partnership for Enlargement partners, tailored to the needs of individual countries. Each would set reform objectives and allocate funds. They would also encompass specific milestones and monitoring of implementation. The amount and disbursement of aid would depend on the level of the plans and their implementation.

Third pillar: Security and political cooperation

A key purpose of the Partnership for Enlargement is to respond to a drastically changed geopolitical situation. This situation offers little prospect of a return to a collective European security system. Regardless of how and when the war in Ukraine ends, Russia will remain a threat to the EU. It is impossible to envisage a restoration of trust in relations with Vladimir Putin's regime or its ilk that would allow the creation of a lasting framework for a security order based on common principles. The countries within the Partnership for Enlargement in particular (and Ukraine above all) will be vulnerable to Russia's attempts to subjugate, destabilise, and bring them into its sphere of influence. Other possible threats should not be overlooked either. They include China's infiltration into, and the bolstering of, its influence in the Balkans and eastern Europe, as well as Turkey's aspirations to play a more active role in the Balkans especially. All of these actions will not only threaten the stability of these countries but also pose a serious risk to the interests of the EU.

If the Partnership for Enlargement is to have its intended effect – paving the way to the eventual EU accession of new members and preventing permanent destabilisation of the EU's immediate neighbourhood – it also needs to play a role in the area of security. For the EU to gain a geopolitical identity and build its sovereignty, and given that these ambitions are now more important than ever,

then its contribution to the security of eastern Europe and the Balkans will be the most important test of its ability to achieve these goals. In the case of Ukraine in particular, any plans for integration or cooperation with the EU will only be feasible if the country manages not only to defend itself against current Russian aggression, but also to build a deterrent capacity that minimises the likelihood of a similar war in the future. The EU as a whole, and its member states on a bilateral basis, should be ready to provide Ukraine with lasting support in this respect, especially in a situation where neither NATO membership nor any security guarantees from the West will be a realistic solution in the foreseeable future.

Existing ideas for new forms of cooperation and support, which some EU member states found too far-fetched before the war, may now receive more attention. Under the European Peace Facility (EPF), the EU has been funding significant military support to Ukraine since the start of the war. By mid-April 2022, the EU had released three tranches worth a total of €1.5 billion. It is worth considering making such assistance permanent under the EPF, with the amount of such a permanent fund for Ukraine (and other eastern European countries) to be politically determined. The fund should finance supplies of arms and military equipment to Ukraine, as well as – depending on international developments – to other Partnership for Enlargement countries that require such support. The committee overseeing and managing the EPF, which includes representatives of the member states, could incorporate representatives of the EU's partner countries as permanent observers.

It is of utmost importance that the EU engage in a planned and long-term manner in strengthening the security of its neighbours. Within the framework of the Partnership for Enlargement, a number of project proposals developed by the European Council on Foreign Relations could be implemented as part of a proposed Eastern Partnership Security Compact.

No less important would be actions that the EU could take in agreement with partner countries, within the framework of its competences. The war has demonstrated the crucial importance of logistics centres, infrastructure, and military mobility in supporting Ukraine to defend itself. In this context, it is worth considering involving partner countries in relevant permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) projects that would promote greater infrastructure coherence among EU and Partnership for Enlargement countries. Before the war, Ukraine had already started negotiations for inclusion in PESCO projects. This possibility exists, but has so far required intensive negotiations.

Furthermore, the EU should set up a strategic forum, which would provide a format for regular high-level meetings between representatives of the EU and the countries participating in the Partnership for Enlargement. These could take place, for example, when the annual reports of the EU's new security strategy, the Strategic Compass, are presented, in which the neighbouring countries play a

key role. Such a forum could be defined as a Security Council of the EU and the Partnership for Enlargement states, and could comprise foreign and defence ministers. Within this framework, representatives could discuss major challenges, risks, and the state of cooperation.

A more ambitious relationship as envisaged under the new partnership also requires stronger political ties. Just as accession to the single market will require integration in the areas of law, economic policy, and the internal market, there will also need to be greater cooperation and coordination in foreign and security policy. Partnership for Enlargement countries should become more deeply embedded in the EU's political framework; without, of course, being involved in the decision-making process until they are full members. A first step would be to invite the heads of state and government of the Partnership for Enlargement countries to the European Council every two years.

Foreign and security policy issues would need to receive a prominent place in the Partnership for Enlargement framework. The existing EU agreements with potential partners stipulate that they are to align themselves closely with or adhere to the CFSP. Whereas associated countries from eastern Europe and Western Balkans states with stabilisation and association agreements have various mechanisms for deepened consultation and cooperation with regard to EU foreign and security policies, candidate countries are expected to follow EU sanctions and declarations – an objective which is not easily achieved, as seen, for example, with the case of Serbia during the war in Ukraine. Therefore, it is worth considering asking Partnership for Enlargement countries to enhance their commitment by following such measures consistently. -

German-Polish cooperation: A driving force behind the Partnership for Enlargement

Germany and Poland will play a key role in bringing Ukraine closer to the EU. Despite their significant differences in terms of policy towards Russia, security policy, and the EU's relations with Ukraine, both countries have an interest in stabilising Ukraine and Europeanising it in terms of its economy and governance.

These countries are central to these questions not only because of their location in Europe, their mutual ties with their eastern neighbours, and their foreign policy interests. Germany and Poland also share a particular wealth of experience that is particularly valuable for the future of Ukraine. Under completely different conditions and along different paths, but nevertheless successfully, both countries managed to rebuild themselves after the second world war and eventually leave behind the legacy of authoritarian rule, totalitarianism, and lack of freedom, as well as – in East Germany and

Poland alike – largely successfully adapting to the requirements of the transition. These are huge challenges that Ukraine will also face.

Both countries should work closely together inside the EU, with the shared aim of achieving an ever-closer partnership between Ukraine and the EU. There are clear potential benefits for both Berlin and Warsaw. For Germany, advocating an ambitious European perspective for Ukraine is an opportunity to correct the image it has acquired, in particular since the war began, of being a laggard when it comes to support for Ukraine. If the EU becomes more active and effective in matters concerning Ukraine (and other countries such as Moldova and Georgia), this will also underline its ability to act externally and show that the CFSP can have real meaning. These are, after all, already the objectives of Germany's European policy.

These benefits also apply to Poland. Moreover, new cooperation with Berlin could alleviate Warsaw's conflict-ridden relationship with its counterpart. Furthermore, Poland could show that, in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine, it wields influence not only on security policy issues but also on another important area of European policy – enlargement – while helping Germany re-energise its activity on Ukraine. Together, Germany and Poland could contribute (directly and indirectly) to the reform of enlargement policy and thus to the resolution of an important issue for the future of the EU.

At the heart of such a German-Polish effort would be the launch of the new ambitious package of offers to Ukraine (and other EU-orientated partners) described above, as part of a new Partnership for Enlargement. Poland would by no means have to distance itself from its stated goal of full EU membership for Ukraine. But the new offer could provide a realistic intermediate step on Ukraine's path to the EU. Germany, on the other hand, could agree to deepen its cooperation with Ukraine without facing the resistance of doubters in the EU. In other words, both countries would technically place the question of membership to one side, but would in fact move closer to bringing about Ukraine's accession to the EU.

Such progress could include the creation of a new 'Friends of the European Partnership for Enlargement' group in the EU Council. Germany and Poland could be its driving forces. This would help to ensure that rapprochement between Ukraine and other partner countries remains on the agenda and is not just a declaration. The group could include the Baltic states, countries such as the Czech Republic, Austria, and Slovenia, and northern European member states.

To coordinate German-Polish activities more closely, both countries could set up a 'perspective group' on Ukraine's future EU pre-accession strategy, with high-level working representatives from the foreign and other relevant ministries, such as the economy and climate ministries. This could be enriched with external experts if necessary. This group should develop ideas to support and make

concrete the deepening of Ukraine's cooperation with the EU.

This also applies to proposals for a future EU plan for the reconstruction of Ukraine. Germany and Poland should demand at an early stage that the reconstruction of Ukraine's infrastructure and other support measures speed up the country's modernisation and contribute to bringing Ukraine closer to the EU. Poland and Germany should also coordinate their own support measures in order to set joint priorities in a targeted manner and, if possible, in cooperation. Polish partners should take part in Germany's energy and climate partnership with Ukraine, and this stream of work could be incorporated directly into the framework of the Partnership for Enlargement.

Conclusion

The coming months will determine whether the EU is up to the most serious challenge it has ever faced. Military, financial, and political assistance to a struggling Ukraine is crucial. But an essential and no less important part of the EU's response to the transformed geopolitical situation will be to rewrite its neighbourhood and enlargement policies. The EU cannot today allow itself to continue with business as usual in this area. But neither can it make empty promises and delude others with the prospect of fast-track membership that is impossible to fulfil.

One thing is clear: those geopolitically vulnerable countries that aspire to join the EU – the three associated countries and Western Balkans states – need to be anchored much more firmly and tangibly in the 'European family'. The urgent task is to provide a concrete offer for them. This, however, needs to proceed without scrapping enlargement policy, which is still a key instrument for the EU's foreign policy and allows the union to influence and stabilise its environment on the basis of its own values and principles. Any offer the EU makes to its European partners in the coming months should therefore not be an alternative to enlargement. The goal of the EU's revised policy should be to build a strongly integrated community of all European countries that share common values and principles. Regardless of when it realises that vision, it is necessary for the EU to pursue this strategic objective.

The EU thus needs a new strategic project in the form of the Partnership for Enlargement. The core of this proposal is not a revised enlargement methodology, nor past ideas of creating a "multi-speed union" or "concentric circles". It envisages the EU taking concrete and highly tangible action to anchor in the 'European family' those countries that wish to move closer to the union. In this way, they will be able to find a permanent place within it. This means involving these countries in stronger cooperation right now, while at the same time intensifying the pressure for them to comply with the fundamental principles of the EU: the rule of law, democracy, and human rights as indispensable preconditions for their full integration with the EU.

Only the combination of three elements – a strategic decision in favour of the enlarged EU, an increased commitment to supporting Partnership for Enlargement countries, and a firm stance on principles and values – will enable the true realisation of the aspirations of Ukrainians and other societies in the EU's European neighbourhood and meet the interests of the EU itself.

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