

THE MAGNIFICENT TEN: A COALITION OF THE WILLING TO DRIVE THE EU'S NEXT ENLARGEMENT

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SUMMARY

- The prospect of a peace settlement in Ukraine has prompted a flurry of activity among the EU and member states on how to carry out enlargement.
- For now, the debate is contained among elites. But this will need to change.
- Key “clusters” of member states can begin to address this. They should work together to create a new approach to enlargement and tailor messages to voters.
- To drive an accession framework suitable to the geopolitical and domestic challenges of today, a “Team Enlargement” coalition of ten key EU states should come together.
- This coalition, led by Germany, should work through a four-step timetable to deliver this strategy over the next 18 months.
- The coalition should also promote a narrative that is flexible enough to reflect national and local contexts while sharing the benefits of enlargement for European security and prosperity.

Time to move

The EU lacks a strategy to get Ukraine quickly and safely through the door.

The question has surged to the fore because EU membership is highly likely to be essential to any peace settlement that Kyiv—and the Ukrainian people—would accept. America has also made clear it sees Ukrainian membership as an indispensable element of such a settlement. Ukraine itself is pushing to join as early as 2027.

But the EU and its member states are not ready. They have struggled for decades to absorb new members, and more recently failed to agree on how to bring in Ukraine, Moldova and others. In 2026, proposals have swirled around Brussels and member state capitals; and Berlin has shared a notable proposal that aims to answer the question of how to make accession happen.

It is time for the EU to move forward decisively. The geopolitical case for enlarging the EU to include Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans has never been more compelling. Failing to integrate candidate countries bordering the bloc represents a growing vulnerability in economic, political and strategic terms. European leaders largely understand the geopolitical imperative for enlargement. Where they hesitate is over how to make it work in practice. They are faced with public scepticism, questions about the EU's own preparedness, the rise of far-right parties as well as American transactionalism that undermines EU conditionality frameworks. Many are thus asking the same question: Can the EU successfully enlarge without overstretching itself?

This policy brief identifies the key challenges shaping the current enlargement debate within the EU. It acknowledges the array of competing enlargement models and explores the lack of alignment between the EU, its member states and candidate countries. The paper draws on the findings of more than 25 interviews conducted by the authors with officials and experts working on enlargement in Europe. Views and ideas shared in closed-door seminars and dinners in Berlin, Paris and Vienna also informed the paper, as did the expertise found in ECFR's network of national offices across Europe.

Listening to policymakers, alongside studying public opinion data, enabled the authors to propose three distinct clusters of member states on enlargement. The “principled conditionalists”—Denmark, Germany and Sweden—support enlargement in principle but also provide its credibility backbone by insisting on rule of law safeguards and institutional reform. The “conditional sceptics”—Austria, France, Italy and the Netherlands—carry political weight but remain risk-averse, with their backing more subject to national concerns. The “security maximalists”—Lithuania and Poland—are driven less by unconditional enthusiasm than by an

urgency rooted in their exposure to Russia. Hungary sits as an outlier that is nevertheless supportive of enlargement in the Western Balkans.

The clusters' logics are not mutually exclusive, and a credible enlargement strategy will need to weave together narratives that appeal across many countries. On this basis, the paper offers solutions that are limited in number but potentially transformational if achieved. EU member states should agree a core, but sizable, Team Enlargement coalition to thrash out the issues. They must make a definitive proposal for a new enlargement framework, agree a timetable for 2026 and 2027, and work hand in hand with candidate countries to make the political case and allay fears about enlargement.

Member states have not yet converged around a single strategy. The moment to move is now; or enlargement may never happen.

Getting on the front foot

The EU debate over enlargement has entered a new, more dynamic phase. This is principally because discussions around an eventual peace settlement for Ukraine invariably presuppose EU membership for the country. This geopolitically driven situation led the European Commission to present member states with three options for enlargement at a dinner in Brussels in March this year. The options were:

- **The status quo:** continue the existing, merit-based accession process, with all its strengths and weaknesses.
- **Enhanced gradual integration:** a version of “gradual integration”—an established idea under which candidate countries would access specific EU policies and benefits progressively, but before they have completed full accession. The enhanced model would introduce new benefits and be linked to negotiation clusters.
- **Phased integration:** also known as “reverse enlargement”, under this model new members would be initially integrated into a small number of selected EU policies, with full rights and obligations extended to them over time. It would make Ukraine a political member before it fulfils all the criteria.

But the commission found little support for reverse enlargement in particular among member states; in the words of an EU official, “this presented the real unity of member states”.^[1] Member state representatives pushed back hard against what they saw as the commission developing new proposals without engaging them first, and indeed on a model they felt to be undeliverable. Nonetheless, member states still seem willing to explore the contours of an enhanced gradual integration model.

Merz's letter

Following the backlash, the commission asked countries for their own ideas.^[2] Small groupings of member states set about drawing up proposals.

One idea, initiated by Austria, came from the informal group of EU member states known as the Friends of Western Balkans. France and Germany each shared plans for Ukraine's accession aiming mainly to develop the concept of gradual integration. France also floated "an integrated state status", which it envisaged would be granted through a European Council decision to open all accession negotiations and provide access to EU funds available to third countries.

But the most influential proposal came in May when German chancellor Friedrich Merz sent a letter to European institutional leaders proposing associate membership for Ukraine. This would give Ukraine a presence in the European Council, European Commission and European Parliament, without voting rights but retaining the eventual aim of full membership. The proposal was unlike anything suggested for an accession country before. (Merz has also argued on several occasions that the EU cannot afford to frustrate the aspirations of Western Balkans countries.)

Among those most closely involved in planning for enlargement, the move was welcomed as a first step in the right direction.^[3] Officials regard it as the most compelling proposal on the table, perhaps the only one with a realistic chance of building consensus.^[4] It has yet to be developed into a full concept. But it has already ignited debate across Europe and could open the way to a feasible enlargement strategy.

Ahead of an EU summit with Western Balkans states held in Montenegro in June, France and Germany issued a joint proposal whose thrust was to simplify the joining process for Western Balkans countries and Moldova. At the European Council meeting in June, Germany pushed for a debate among member states on this idea and his Ukraine proposal. One major change in the first half of 2026 was the result of the Hungarian general election, after which Budapest lifted its veto over starting accession talks for Ukraine. The council duly agreed to open the first cluster on fundamentals for both Ukraine and Moldova.

Merz and Macron further institutionalised their joint proposal in their ministerial council meeting on July 17, and emphasised enlargement's contribution to building "a secure, prosperous and democratic Europe". The two leaders further called on the EU to push for progress internal reforms and trailed an in-depth discussion at the October council meeting.

The politics of enlargement in an age of fragmentation

As they begin to peer over the precipice, domestic decision-makers know they need to create politically sustainable coalitions to see enlargement through.^[5] To build a bridge to enlargement, they will have to tailor both policy design and political messaging to the concerns that dominate in member states. Security, rule of law safeguards, migration management, economic stability, identity and sovereignty concerns—all shape how enlargement is perceived and politically contested across the EU. But the next phase of EU enlargement will not be decided by technical accession criteria alone.

The enlargement debate has so far remained confined to policy circles. However, the lack of conversation with domestic audiences may leave fertile ground for populist and far-right narratives. Such narratives often frame enlargement and associated issues not as a strategic investment but as a source of risk: a driver of migration, a fiscal burden and a potential importer of instability. In particular, the prospect of Ukraine joining the EU is a potential flashpoint, with various forces—from Russian disinformation to European political players—portraying the country as a war risk, a reconstruction and economic liability and a governance challenge. This frames enlargement as something that will harm Europe and Europeans rather than something that will strengthen the EU and keep people safe.

Trump's return to power, alongside the deepening political and ideological links between MAGA-aligned actors and European far-right parties, has given related movements in Europe a renewed sense of confidence and legitimacy. In candidate states, America's transactionalism is eroding the very conditions candidate countries must meet to join the EU—even as Washington still expects Ukraine to become a member. In the Western Balkans, Washington has been actively undermining the EU's rule of law conditionality by engaging with illiberal leaders, including lifting sanctions previously placed on them. Its focus on making money for American business has led to episodes such as the EU ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina warning that US antics were jeopardising the country's EU accession process.

In this political environment, the fear of handing additional ammunition to populists, the spectre of divisive national referendums on future accessions, and the lingering trauma of dealing with Hungary deter decision-makers in EU capitals from openly engaging with the enlargement debate.^[6]

Building a team

Enlargement can only succeed if the process, the chosen model and the accompanying politics all address the concerns outlined above. Member states remain divided over which model to adopt for acceding countries. But what commonalities could EU capitals converge around? What could give them a solid basis with which to go to their electorates?

To find out what plausible coalition could look like, the authors of this paper focused on the following ten EU members: France, Germany and the Netherlands (members that talk above all about the importance of merit-based accession and the rule of law); Austria and Italy (the driving forces in the existing Friends of Western Balkans group); Denmark, Poland, Lithuania and Sweden (which border Ukraine and the eastern neighbourhood and support the accession of Ukraine and other candidate states); and Hungary (an outlier, because it supports the integration of Western Balkans countries but long blocked Ukraine's accession).

The authors then examined four key issues that could bring the ten member states together and enable consensus on enlargement. As noted, they drew on interviews with officials in Brussels and EU capitals, discussions with experts at different convenings and their own desk research.

Maintaining merit-based conditionality and adherence to the rule of law

The first of the four unifying issues is merit-based conditionality and the rule of law: they are the foundation of the enlargement process, and the one point on which none of the ten disagrees. European Council president António Costa and European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen reconfirmed the centrality of these issues at the most recent EU-Western Balkans summit. These principles are also firmly embedded in the 2020 revamped enlargement methodology. The “Fundamentals” cluster covers core EU values and principles, the rule of law, fundamental rights and the democratic functioning of institutions. This cluster is first to open in accession negotiations, but it is also the last to close. This is to ensure rule of law conditionality is applied throughout other clusters and chapters.

Denying access to membership funds before full accession

The second issue is driven by fears that new members' financial demands will reduce the amount of cohesion funding existing member states receive. The common agricultural policy (CAP) is often the main focus of policymakers because of worries about Ukraine's massive

agricultural potential. Although the commission has suggested pre-accession allocated funds for Ukraine and other accession countries, its new proposal for the new multi-annual financial framework omits any suggestion of allocated funds for new members. Since the recommencement of Russian aggression in 2022, the commission has increased the amount of pre-accession funds for the Western Balkans, Moldova and Ukraine. The growth plan for the Western Balkans aims to integrate countries into the single market and deepen EU-related reform.

Applying safeguards and reversibility

In June, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands suggested the accession treaties of new member states should include a new blueprint to support “sustained progress after enlargement”. The goal was to strengthen the rule of law but also to boost public support for the ratification of future accession treaties. The commission and member states are looking for ways to insulate the new enlargement framework from Orban-style regression in the rule of law and democratic practices after new members join. Aligning around this issue will reassure both policymakers and voters that the EU can enlarge without then being undermined from within.

Controlling migration

Migration is the top concern connected to enlargement according to the latest EU barometer on “Attitudes towards EU Enlargement”, at 40% (followed by corruption and organised crime at 39%, and the cost to European taxpayers at 37%). In Austria 47% of people express concern about uncontrolled migration arising from future enlargement, and the figures are similar in Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden. Although mobility concerns are driven more by Schengen arrangements and transition periods than by accession itself, this remains an under-communicated element of the accession debate. Parts of the accession process (Chapter 24, Justice and Home Affairs) are aimed at preventing migrants from transiting through candidate countries. Still, enlargement-sceptic countries refer to the issue of uncontrolled migration to slow-walk accession.

The only genuine common ground across all ten member states examined (including Hungary) is merit-based conditionality—it is the glue that holds this group together. No member state publicly opposes this; disagreement centres on what “merit” means in practice and how fast the bar can be cleared. What could keep the group divided is the tension between Ukraine becoming a member first, with Western Balkans states coming later (although a new enlargement approach open to all candidates could address this tension).

Three clusters on enlargement

The ten countries analysed can be clustered into three distinct groupings. Each has different primary drivers, domestic constraints and potential roles in building a coalition to drive enlargement.

ECFR polling shows that a big chunk of European voters are yet to make up their mind about enlargement in the current context. Space remains for opinions to change, either for or against enlargement. The following three clusters can help shape this trajectory. (The clusters are covered in more detail in the annex, including public opinion polling.)

Principled conditionalists, comprising Denmark, Germany and Sweden

These countries' support for enlargement is genuine but calibrated by strong insistence on a merit-based approach, the rule of law and strict institutional quality. These member states provide credibility on governance standards without which an enlargement framework could appear to trade the rule of law and conditionality for geopolitical imperatives.

Conditional sceptics, comprising Austria, France, Italy and the Netherlands

These countries' support for accession is real but determined through specific national concerns (decision-making safeguards for France, fiscal prudence for the Netherlands, migration for Italy and Austria). It is unlikely the members of this group will proactively champion enlargement in the near term. But they could come along as supporters of an initial framework for future members, especially if they can secure specific gains.

Security maximalists, comprising Lithuania and Poland

These countries' support for enlargement is not entirely unconditional, but it is urgency-driven and anchored in these countries' existential threat perception of Russia. Lithuania and Poland articulate the geopolitical urgency and the eastern European solidarity essential to any future enlargement framework.

The outlier, comprising Hungary

Prime minister Peter Magyar's government will not obstruct Ukraine's accession and financial support like his predecessor, Viktor Orban, did. Moreover, with Budapest no longer providing a convenient shield, some member states may increasingly have to reveal their own rather sceptical positions on enlargement.

Clusters and coalitions

Cluster	Main fear	Main enlargement logic	Far-right pressure point	What can be sold politically	Preferred narrative	Coalition role
Principled conditionalists (Denmark, Germany, Sweden)	Institutional dysfunction, democratic backsliding	Enlargement with safeguards and credibility	"EU cannot manage itself", nationalism, sovereignty politics	Rule of law, conditionality, reversibility, controlled enlargement	"Credible and responsible enlargement"	Provide legitimacy and governance credibility
Conditional sceptics (Austria, France, Italy, the Netherlands)	Migration, economic disruption, fiscal burden	Enlargement only if politically manageable	Enlargement as chaos, unfair burden, instability, enlargement not desired by public	Economic safeguards, transition periods, migration management, practical gains evident to voters	"Managed enlargement with pragmatism and gains for the EU and its member states at its core"	Support enlargement if reassured
Security maximalists (Lithuania, Poland)	Russian aggression, geopolitical vacuum	Enlargement as security architecture	Anti-Brussels sovereignty politics, putting Ukraine above the needs of domestic audiences	Defence, resilience, strategic sovereignty, Ukraine as a security asset	"Security through enlargement"	Maintain urgency and momentum
Outlier (Hungary)	Domestic backlash	Transactional and domestically constrained	Anti-Ukraine narratives, anti-Brussels rhetoric	National-interest framing, gradual normalisation	"Protecting sovereignty within Europe"	Passive enabler in the best-case scenario

The clusters were constructed by the authors on the basis of an assessment of interviews, public opinion data, the public positioning of the countries on EU enlargement and analysis of the narratives surrounding EU enlargement. They reflect recurring themes identified across EU enlargement debates, including salient domestic public concerns and sensitivities, as well as framings advanced by political parties. As such, they help identify narratives and measures (such as safeguards and transition periods) with the greatest potential to resonate with both governments and their electorates, foster support for enlargement and explain each cluster's role within the coalition.

The review and the summarising table display the different logics of the clusters and the roles each would play in a broader coalition. Those logics and roles are not mutually exclusive. If balanced correctly, these can be used to devise a credible, watertight (to the extent this is possible) enlargement strategy that respects the urgency of the matter while bringing EU citizens on board. For example, a French government can confidently say it is insisting on rigorous merit-based standards while retaining its influence in EU decision-making. A Dutch government can say it is applying strict rule of law principles as well as fiscal prudence. An Austrian or an Italian government can say it has secured migration management as a precondition.

The coalition's centre of gravity is situated between the urgency felt in Lithuania and Poland and the emphasis placed on conditionality in countries like France and the Netherlands. The credibility insisted on by Denmark, Germany and Sweden can enable them to build bridges among the different clusters. Austria and Italy could be brought along provided some of their wishes, such as controlled migration and economic security, are met. The politics of Hungary could always prove difficult but the opportunity now exists to move ahead.

How to make enlargement happen

Set up a “Team Enlargement” coalition

The ten member states examined here should form a “Team Enlargement” coalition. Its goals would be to agree the parameters of the next phase of accession and actively shape domestic discourse on enlargement.

Germany would be a key player because of its support for merit-based accession, exploration of new approaches, and express political commitment to accession countries. Merz's May letter set Germany apart as the member state willing to lead on this major question facing the EU. The principles set out in the letter encapsulated almost completely the issues that divide—but could unite—Team Enlargement: its stipulation that associate membership is intended as an interim step towards full membership; its insistence that candidate states must fulfil the criteria to become a fully-fledged member; its denial of access to funds reserved for EU states until full membership is achieved; its enshrining of reversibility should the country show signs of regress.

A Team Enlargement coalition also aligns with evolving German policy more generally. In May 2026, the German federal foreign minister Johann Wadepful laid out six points on Germany's role in Europe's politics. The first point described forming coalitions of member states around topics where consensus cannot be found among all 27 EU member states.

Take four steps to lock in a durable enlargement strategy by 2027

Team Enlargement should take the following four steps to drive a new enlargement strategy.

Step one—Agree to develop the “Merz letter” into a full concept

Timeframe: From now until the October 2026 European Council meeting)

A German lead supported by the security maximalists and principled conditionalists should move forward and turn Merz’s letter into a fully developed enlargement concept. This would set out a framework of principles structured explicitly around the four key issues: merit-based conditionality, no access to certain funds before full membership, safeguards and reversibility, and migration. Next, Germany should circulate the concept to the remaining coalition members—conditional sceptics will have the ability to ensure it adequately addresses domestic concerns and is shaped with national sensitivities in mind, thereby strengthening its political viability. The concept would then be refined through iteration and broadened out to other supportive member states. Throughout, Germany should continually work with France as a co-shaper of the process. Meanwhile, discussions with Hungary would focus less on shaping the concept itself and more on mitigating potential veto risks and limiting future obstruction.

Step two—Share a new narrative on enlargement

Timeframe: From now until late 2026

Wherever they are starting from, each member state should recognise the inevitability—and potential urgency—of providing for Ukraine, and being seen to play their part in bringing about peace.

Member state governments would therefore be well advised to invest in domestic narrative work. This would include parliamentary debates, media and influencer outreach, civil society action, social media campaigns and expert analysis. But effective narrative preparation cannot be the responsibility of governments alone. The political sensitivity of enlargement means a whole-of-society approach is essential to ensure the conversation is credible and inclusive. Experts, academics and think-tanks can contribute evidence-based analysis that helps counter misinformation. Businesses and economic stakeholders would bring practical perspectives, highlighting opportunities for the economy. Civil society organisations can involve local communities, youth groups and underrepresented voices. Governments can share lessons learned and best practice among themselves, and especially so within the clusters.

On specific messaging, the principled conditionalists can lead and anchor the process in rule of law, safeguards and credibility. The conditional sceptics can demonstrate that enlargement can be managed in ways that protect economic stability and address public concerns. The security maximalists can set out the security rationale to their domestic audiences but also to the other coalition members. As such, rather than promoting a single rigid vision, a broad European narrative should allow member states to emphasise the aspects most relevant to their domestic realities.

Step three—Secure endorsement by the European Council

Timeframe: October and December 2026

The coalition would propose the new enlargement framework as a formal position in the General Affairs Council ahead of the October European Council meeting, with coalition members working to gain the support of other member states. Coalition clusters should draw on their respective strengths in this effort: principled conditionalists should underline the framework's credibility; conditional sceptics should help reassure more cautious governments that concerns related to migration, fiscal impacts and economic disruption have been adequately addressed; security maximalists should make the strategic and geopolitical case for enlargement. Acting in concert, the coalition would aim to demonstrate the framework combines security and geopolitical imperatives with responsible governance and risk management.

At the October 2026 European Council meeting, EU member states should endorse the new enlargement proposal. The Irish presidency would be charged with using the December 2026 European Council to agree political conclusions that endorse the framework.

Step four—Put the new framework into practice

Timeframe: Throughout 2027

The EU would apply the framework to candidates Albania, Moldova, Montenegro and Ukraine to demonstrate its use as a functional governance instrument. In particular, Montenegro's accession treaty will provide the first opportunity to put the new framework into practice. This would build confidence among sceptical EU member states that enlargement can be both strategically necessary and responsibly governed. The accession treaty could then act as a final membership contract for Montenegro as it joins.

Work more closely with candidate states

Candidate states have an important role to play in helping reduce anti-enlargement sentiment across the ten member states analysed in this paper. Beyond aligning with formal accession requirements, candidate countries will need to adapt to a far more politicised and fragile enlargement environment inside the EU itself.

This means the governments of candidate states must prepare to take seriously the fears surrounding enlargement in existing members. They must of course demonstrate a clear and sustained commitment to implementing EU reforms in full and swiftly, particularly regarding the rule of law, anti-corruption measures, democratic governance and institutional resilience. They should also demonstrate openness to discussing safeguards, transitional arrangements, migration management mechanisms and other tools. This can help reassure sceptical member states and voters that enlargement would remain controlled and manageable.

Crucially, candidate states need to pay close attention to the domestic political realities within member states. Political leaders in member states operate within politically constrained environments and contend with strong domestic pressure on issues such as migration, economic security and agriculture. In turn, EU member states should signal how domestic sensitivities may obstruct the path to accession. With this two-way communication in place, candidate countries should work with member states to identify ways to make enlargement more politically sustainable across different national contexts.

This could include candidate state representatives speaking directly with audiences in member states. Citizens' dialogues, town hall discussions and public debates on issues that matter to local communities should become the hallmark of a sustained public communications and outreach campaign. Business roadshows, investment forums, study visits, cultural initiatives and exchange programmes for community leaders—all these activities can make candidate countries more familiar and relatable to EU citizens. These should take place across all parts of a country, not just in capital cities.

Conclusion

The approach suggested by this paper can help build a broad European narrative around enlargement: one that combines enhanced security with enlargement that is credible, responsible and managed. The purpose of such a narrative would be not to erase national differences or political sensitivities—having a single grand and rigid vision on enlargement could be counterproductive. But it will allow different member states to emphasise the aspects of enlargement most relevant to their domestic political realities while remaining part of a coherent collective strategy.

European leaders must be ready to promote and defend stories and visions for a better future. They should also do this sooner rather than later, given the calendar of elections in the coming years. The opportunity for a newly minted enlargement framework will shrink as the months pass—France’s 2027 electoral cycle will freeze discussions and decision-making around enlargement, as will elections in other member states during the second half of 2026 and 2027. The uncertainty around when a ceasefire might take place in Ukraine only increases the pressure on the EU and member states to prepare.

While none of the candidate countries (with the possible exception of Montenegro) is ready to join the EU today, now is precisely the moment for the EU and its member states to act. This means seeing through reforms via a credible and strictly conditional accession process. The other main challenge will be for the EU to prepare itself internally—its institutions, politics, and, crucially, its publics—for the moment when candidates are ready to join. This, too, will require a specific, and urgent strand of work which must take place in parallel to the work lead by Team Enlargement.

Annex

Today, enlargement politics are rooted in different political logics competing over what kind of enlargement Europe can politically sustain. As such, enlargement can only succeed if it addresses multiple forms of insecurity simultaneously among the clusters of countries identified in the paper. The clusters provide a way to understand the dynamics at play, the commonalities between countries and domestic drivers within them.

Principled conditionalists (Denmark, Germany and Sweden)

This cluster favours EU enlargement in principle and brings a backbone of credibility and legitimacy to the process. For the states in this cluster, safeguards within the enlargement process are crucial, as they dread new dysfunction within the EU, do not want a repetition of dealing with Hungary in the Orban years, stress the importance of the rule of law and have fiscal concerns.^[7] This group worries about the EU falling apart if enlargement is not carried out correctly. As such, the principled conditionalists may not fear enlargement itself, but they do fear enlargement without control.

This generally positive stance is strongly reflected in public opinion—75% of people in Denmark, 49% in Germany and 79% in Sweden back EU enlargement. In all these countries, respondents identify “complicated decision-making at EU level” as their biggest concern about

enlargement. Worries around corruption, organised crime, terrorism and costs to European taxpayers follow. Unsurprisingly, respondents stress upholding the rule of law, the fight against corruption and protecting fundamental rights as the elements crucial to the success of future enlargement.

Such topics are often found among the narratives of the far-right—that new members would bring corruption with them into the EU, make European cities less safe through uncontrolled migration and worsen the already-bureaucratic monster of EU decision-making. In this context, the principled conditionalists cluster could help take on the challenge contained in these attacks by supporting the credibility of enlargement policy. The commitment to enlargement shown by the members of this cluster means they can play an important role as the broker between geopolitical urgency and ensuring the credibility and feasibility of the enlargement process.

Conditional sceptics (Austria, France, Italy and the Netherlands)

The states within this cluster carry significant political weight but are (domestically) politically risk-averse towards enlargement. The governments of these countries worry that enlargement would not be politically survivable with their electorates. As such, their politics often revolve around issues such as domestic stability, migration, economic security, social cohesion and fiscal concerns. Top concerns among conditional sceptics for both governments and publics centre on economic security, the costs of enlargement and the financial burden created by admitting new members. In countries such as France and Italy, these are the practical worries that likely include fears of reduction of cohesion funds, destabilisation in the labour market and the impact of Ukraine's membership on the CAP given its massive agricultural sector. All that being said, voters in these countries could be further persuaded in either direction: 45% of people in Austria, 43% in France, 53% in Italy and 69% in the Netherlands are in favour of further EU enlargement.

Voters in the countries in this cluster also have other worries: respondents in France and Italy note uncontrolled migration as their main concern. In Austria, the costs to European taxpayers, corruption, organised crime and terrorism, downward pressure on employment or wages, and uncontrolled migration are the main concerns.

The conditional sceptics are unlikely ever to become enlargement enthusiasts. But they could find ways to secure reassurance for themselves and their voters and refrain from blocking the process. They do not respond well to moralising and share many of the ideas and worries of the principled conditionalists—they have a pragmatic approach that emphasises practical gains, control, predictability and risk management. Addressing these should thus be core to any enlargement strategy.

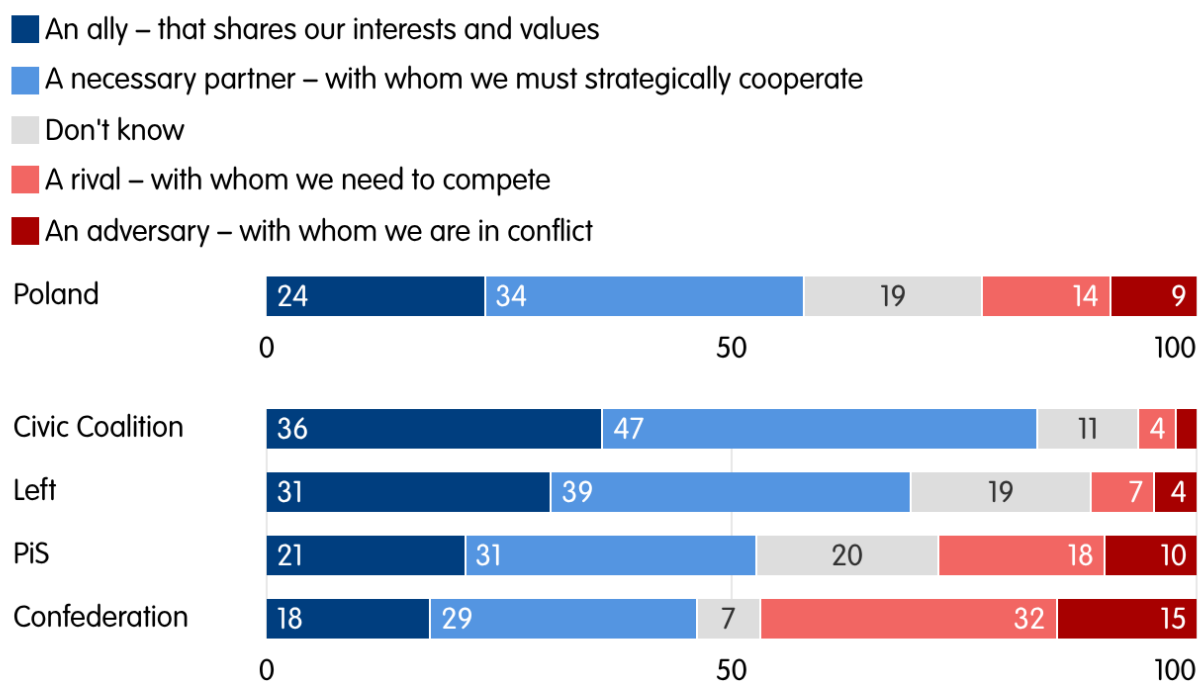
Security maximalists (Lithuania and Poland)

In Lithuania and Poland, enlargement is looked on very favourably: 74% of people in Lithuania and 70% of people in Poland indicate their support. When asked about the biggest benefit of future enlargement, a “more secure EU and better defence against foreign influence” is the top choice among respondents in both countries. Alongside this, the countries of this cluster and their publics stress the necessity for a merit-based approach and emphasise the rule of law. Nevertheless, the sense of urgency is palpable, which may allow the security maximalists to be creative in the solutions for enlargement they would accept. This could include being open to interim solutions for candidate states.

In Lithuania especially, Ukraine’s accession is considered a key element in Europe’s security architecture. Poland’s position is also supportive, with the added nuance that this support is driven by Ukraine’s integration into the West (and especially into NATO) being a strategic necessity for Poland. Concerns around domestic agricultural competition, labour markets and historical memory issues can induce a somewhat more cautious outlook regarding Ukraine’s EU accession. This leads many in Poland to favour a gradual approach, complete with safeguards, transition periods and carve-outs.

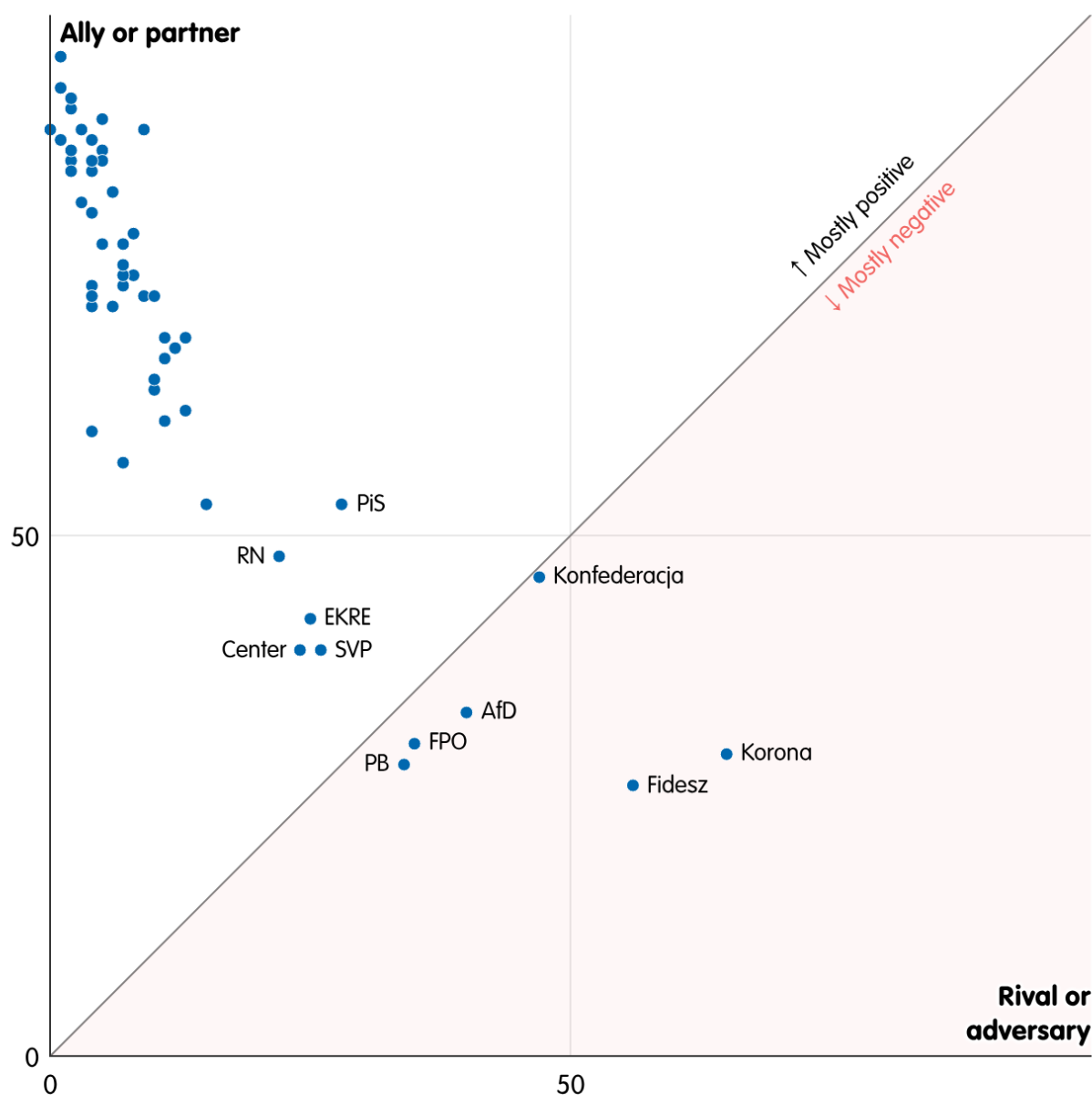
The tension is evident both within the public but also between the oft-diverging views of the Polish government, presidency and other political power centres. Just recently, a leader of the nationalist far-right Confederation party argued Poland should block Ukrainian accession over historical disputes, including a military unit name controversy and Volhynia massacre exhumations. Such anti-Ukraine sentiment is also reflected in ECFR polling, which shows that the voters of the two far-right parties in Poland see Ukraine as primarily a “rival” or an “adversary”. (Similar sentiments are shared by supporters of the Freedom Party of Austria, Fidesz in Hungary and Alternative for Germany.)

Generally speaking, thinking about Ukraine, which of the following statements best reflects your view on what it is to the EU? Poland's answers by political lean, in %



Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uuringute in May 2026
ECFR · ecf.eu

Generally speaking, thinking about Ukraine, which of the following best reflects your view on what they are to the EU*? By voter intention, in %



*In the UK and Switzerland, the question concerned perceived relationship of Ukraine with respondents' country, not with the EU.

Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turuuringute in May 2026
ECFR · ecf.eu

The security maximalists may lead on the geopolitical and security narrative of enlargement and present it as a crucial element of European security. Without the close involvement of this cluster, the whole process could slip into proceduralism or slowly disappear altogether. At the

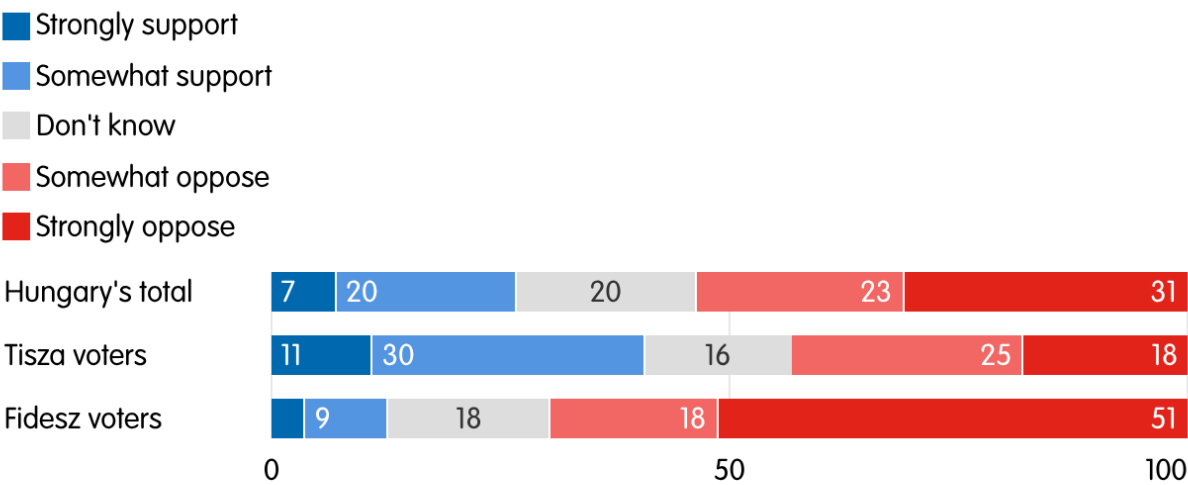
same time, this cluster can strongly relate to, and cooperate with, the principled conditionalists and conditional sceptics on the need to uphold the rule of law and obtain clear commitments to reforms from candidates.

Outlier (Hungary)

This year’s change of government in Hungary may well enable a reset between Budapest and Brussels on questions of enlargement. ECFR data reveal that the new prime minister’s mandate is not straightforward. While the new government aims to restore trust and ties with its European allies and partners, Magyar will be dealing with a society that expects domestic matters to come first. It is split on Ukraine following a decade of anti-Kyiv propaganda, with Fidesz voters being particularly opposed Ukraine’s accession bid moving forward.

To what extent would you support or oppose the next Hungarian government to unblock EU membership negotiations with Ukraine?
By declared vote, in %

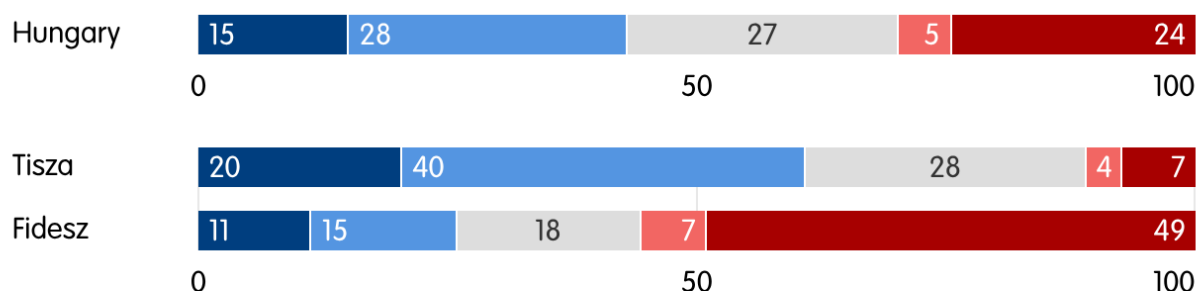
► **EU membership negotiations with Ukraine**



Source: Online poll conducted in Hungary by Stratega Research and Mandate Research between April 17th and 27th, 2026 on a sample of 1,001 adult citizens.
ECFR · ecfr.eu

Generally speaking, thinking about Ukraine, which of the following statements best reflects your view on what it is to the EU? Hungary's answers by political lean, in %

- An ally – that shares our interests and values
- A necessary partner – with whom we must strategically cooperate
- Don't know
- A rival – with whom we need to compete
- An adversary – with whom we are in conflict



Source: ECFR-commissioned public opinion survey, conducted by YouGov, Mandate Research and Turu-uringute in May 2026
ECFR · ecfr.eu

A total of 64% of Hungarians say they favour further EU enlargement, for mainly pragmatic reasons: being part of a larger, more innovative market, and gaining more opportunities for work and skilled labour. Causes for worry include corruption, organised crime and terrorism, along with increased vulnerability to security challenges.

Hungary is unlikely to seek creative solutions around EU enlargement, especially when it comes to Ukraine. Its government will have to navigate turbulent waters and needs time to change public perceptions. Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe Budapest will drop its previous role as blocker-in-chief on Ukrainian membership. Domestically, enlargement could gain more sustainable traction if the economic and pragmatic benefits of welcoming new members are tangibly showcased to citizens, in a similar vein to the challenge facing members of the conditional sceptics cluster.

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[1] ECFR closed-door high-level dinner, Berlin, May 2026.

[2] Author interviews with high-level EU officials, Brussels, March 2026.

[3] ECFR closed-door high-level dinner, Berlin, May 2026.

[4] ECFR closed-door high-level dinner, Berlin, May 2026.

[5] Author interview with officials, Paris, March 2026.

[6] Author interviews in Brussels, Paris and Berlin, March and April 2026.

[7] Author interviews in Brussels, March 2026, and Berlin, April-May 2026.

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