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FROM MERIT TO MIGHT: RETHINKING EU ENLARGEMENT IN LIGHT OF TÜRKIYE AND UKRAINE

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Abstract

This article examines the recent developments in the European Union's (EU) enlargement policy, arguing that the process has shifted from a primarily normative framework that prioritised democracy and economic integration to one increasingly influenced by geopolitics and security. Consequently, enlargement, a process historically characterised by its normative conditionality, has become a key instrument of strategic autonomy, and its credibility depends on reconciling the EU's foundational values with the urgency of security priorities. The present comparative case study of Türkiye and Ukraine analyses how geopolitical developments— particularly Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine—have forced the EU to reevaluate its priorities in the enlargement process. While Türkiye's decades-long accession trajectory has stalled as a result of political divergences and normative deficiencies, Ukraine's candidacy has been unprecedentedly fast despite war and economic fragility, highlighting the EU's shift towards geostrategic alignment. The study reveals a dual approach: fast-tracking candidates aligned with security imperatives while sidelining others despite longstanding candidate status. This raises critical questions about the coherence, credibility, and the role of normativity in the future of EU enlargement. The article concludes that sustaining the effectiveness of enlargement requires balancing geopolitical imperatives with the EU's foundational values.

Keywords

EU enlargement, geopolitics, Türkiye, Ukraine, strategic autonomy.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa os recentes desenvolvimentos na política de alargamento da União Europeia (UE), argumentando que o processo passou de um quadro principalmente normativo, que priorizava a democracia e a integração económica, para um quadro cada vez mais influenciado pela geopolítica e pela segurança. Consequentemente, o alargamento, um processo historicamente caracterizado pela sua condicionalidade normativa, tornou-se um instrumento fundamental de autonomia estratégica, e a sua credibilidade depende da conciliação dos valores fundamentais da UE com a urgência das prioridades de segurança. O presente estudo comparativo de caso da Turquia e da Ucrânia analisa como os desenvolvimentos geopolíticos — particularmente a invasão da Ucrânia pela Rússia em 2022 — forçaram a UE a reavaliar as suas prioridades no processo de alargamento. Enquanto a trajetória de adesão da Turquia, que se arrasta há décadas, estagnou como resultado de divergências políticas e deficiências normativas, a candidatura da Ucrânia foi excepcionalmente rápida, apesar da guerra e da fragilidade económica, destacando a

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mudança da UE para um alinhamento geoestratégico. O estudo revela uma abordagem dupla: acelerar os candidatos alinhados com os imperativos de segurança, enquanto marginaliza outros, apesar do seu estatuto de candidatos de longa data. Isto levanta questões críticas sobre a coerência, a credibilidade e o papel da normatividade no futuro do alargamento da UE. O artigo conclui que, para manter a eficácia do alargamento, é necessário equilibrar os imperativos geopolíticos com os valores fundamentais da UE..

Palavras-chave

Alargamento da UE, geopolítica, Turquia, Ucrânia, autonomia estratégica.

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Introduction

Since its beginning, the EU has framed enlargement as a normative project that embodies its commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Candidate status was awarded to countries that met the Copenhagen criteria and had adopted the required reforms to align with EU standards. However, the geopolitical reality of the 2020s, most notably Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, necessitates a major reassessment of this normative model (Schwarz, 2025). It can be argued that enlargement has increasingly become a tool of geopolitics, shaped by security, energy resilience, and institutional stability.

This shift in priorities is especially visible in the accession trajectories of Türkiye and Ukraine, which are examined here as case studies due to their strategic significance, geopolitical context, and comparable size, despite differences in population and economic capabilities.[1] Türkiye, historically a critical NATO ally and an official EU candidate since 1999, exemplifies the normative model's limitations when strategic importance collides with internal reforms and ideological divergence. Ukraine, by contrast, demonstrates how geopolitical urgency—in this case, the threat to the European order—can override conventional progression logic.

Comparing these two countries is not new in the enlargement literature. Earlier studies, such as the monograph *EU Accession Prospects for Turkey and Ukraine: Debates in New Member States* edited by Piotr Kaźmirkiewicz (2006b), noted that Türkiye appeared institutionally closer to EU membership than Ukraine, which at the time remained outside the accession framework. Yet, the situation has shifted dramatically. While Türkiye's candidacy has stagnated, Ukraine's accession process has accelerated since 2022 despite war and institutional fragility. This reversal underscores the EU's transition from conditionality-driven integration to strategic, security-oriented expansion. Moreover, despite Türkiye's larger size, both countries pose comparable challenges to the EU's absorption capacity, as admitting either would necessitate extensive institutional reforms, particularly regarding unanimity in decision-making.

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[1] The area of Ukraine is 603 550 km^2 and the area of Türkiye is 783 562 km^2. The population of Ukraine is estimated to be around 37 900 000, while population of Türkiye is more than double, at 85 372 377.

This article focuses on the EU's enlargement trajectory from 2005 to 2025, assessing how Türkiye's stagnation and Ukraine's acceleration reflect the shift from liberal-democratic conditionality to geopolitical consolidation. It explores how public opinion, bilateral agreements, and institutional discourse reinforce this reorientation, while considering underlying biases, such as Islamophobia, that, though less explicit in contemporary discourse, continue to shape perceptions of Türkiye's candidacy. The paper draws on the theoretical lens of geopolitical realism to situate enlargement within broader debates on power politics and strategic autonomy. The purpose of this study is not to evaluate which approach is preferable but to expose the nuances, tensions, and inconsistencies in the EU's evolving enlargement strategy and to consider their implications for the credibility and coherence of enlargement as both policy and identity.

Geopolitical Realism and the Strategic Turn in EU Enlargement

From the outset, EU enlargement was framed as a project of liberal order-building. The Commission's 2005 strategy document stated that its primary purpose was to "ensure security, stability and prosperity on its own continent and further afield," noting that "[a]ll European citizens benefit from having neighbours that are stable democracies and prosperous market economies," (Commission of the European Communities, 2005, p. 2). Security, in this conception, was the by-product of democratic transformation and market integration. Two decades later, this logic has been inverted: stability is no longer expected to emerge automatically from liberal conditionality but rather has become the primary rationale for enlargement itself.

Geopolitical realism

This article interprets this reversal through the lens of geopolitical realism, a framework increasingly applied in the analysis of EU foreign policy (Bosse, 2024; Osypchuk & Raik, 2023; Schimmelfennig, 2025; Schwarz, 2025; Zorić, 2025). Realism does not deny the importance of values, but it treats them as subordinate to survival, security, and power projection in an anarchic international environment. For much of its history, the EU has cultivated an image of itself as a normative power. Yet, when confronted with systemic shocks, its behaviour reveals realist logics and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was decisive in accelerating this realist turn.

Enlargement then becomes more than a reward for democracy. From 2025 onward, enlargement of the EU is a strategic calculation to secure borders, to anchor vulnerable states to the EU's institutional framework, and, most importantly, to deter rival powers. Despite its longstanding NATO membership, Türkiye's still valid candidacy and strategic importance illustrate the limitations of a purely normative model. Ukraine's rapid progression to candidacy, by contrast, demonstrates how geopolitical urgency takes precedence over concerns about institutional fragility or incomplete reforms.

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Enlargement as a tool for strategic autonomy

The EU's recent discourse on "strategic autonomy" is the foundation of this recalibration. Initially reserved for issues of defence and energy self-sufficiency, strategic autonomy now extends to enlargement as well. The Draghi Report (2024), one of the most recent and extensive publications on the matter, has urged investments in defence industries, resilience to economic coercion, and closer security partnerships with regional actors. Enlargement is thus no longer treated as a distant teleological project, but as a pillar of strategic resilience. This logic is already embedded in initiatives such as the European Defence Industrial Strategy (European Commission, n.d.) and reiterated in political declarations, including the Granada Declaration (European Council, 2023). The release of the European Commission's White Paper for European Defence on 19 March 2025 only confirms that international security is currently a matter of the utmost importance on the EU agenda. According to the Paper, the EU pledges to pass legislation that will strengthen the EU's defence industry and create a defence market that will ensure that the EU is prepared for a worst-case security scenario by 2030. Moreover, the Paper includes several provisions for supporting Ukraine, including improved military mobility and infrastructure, and further integrating Ukraine into the EU's defence mechanisms. To achieve these aims by 2030, the ReARM Europe Plan has been introduced, and with it, up to EUR 800 billion of planned defence-related expenditures (European Commission, 2025a).

The criteria for enlargement have already shifted. While the Copenhagen benchmarks remain formally in place, greater weight is now attached to geopolitical alignment, reliability, and contributions to European security. In Türkiye's case, the real obstacle does not seem to lie only in democratic backsliding, but in a perceived divergence from EU strategic priorities. Ukraine, conversely, has been treated as indispensable to Europe's security architecture, despite the unfinished nature of its reform agenda. Thus, it can be argued that enlargement has been reconfigured as a mechanism to extend the EU's strategic autonomy to its neighbourhood (Borell, 2022; Draghi, 2024).

Using enlargement as strategic leverage

The realist reinterpretation is visible in the proliferation of bilateral and multilateral security agreements since the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Ukraine has concluded security cooperation treaties with nearly all EU member states, as well as Canada (*Agreement on Security Cooperation between Canada and Ukraine*, 2024), Norway (*Norway and Ukraine Sign Security Cooperation Agreement*, 2024), and the UK (*UK-Ukraine Agreement on Security Cooperation*, 2024). Türkiye, although sidelined institutionally, has also deepened its security networks: it has signed trade and defence agreements with Italy (*Turkey and Italy Strengthen Ties with Trade and Defense Agreements*, 2025), a strategic partnership and three agreements with Slovakia (*Türkiye and Slovakia Sign Declaration on Establishing Strategic Partnership and Three Agreements*, 2025), and trilateral naval cooperation with Romania and Bulgaria to counter mine threats in the Black Sea (*Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria to Cooperate in Mine Hunting*, 2024). Beyond Europe, Ankara has expanded its security footprint through twenty-four agreements with Pakistan (Rakipoğlu et al., 2025), thirteen bilateral agreements with Indonesia, including on co-production of

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Bayraktar TB3 and AKINCI drones (Alpay, 2025), and a defence cooperation agreement with Syria (*Türkiye, Syria Sign Military Cooperation, Training Deal*, 2025).

These developments underscore a crucial point: enlargement is no longer solely about internal transformation of candidates, but also about their capacity to participate in Europe's emerging security order. By integrating Ukraine, the EU strengthens deterrence against Russia and anchors Kyiv within the Western liberal order. Thus, Türkiye's exclusion, as mentioned elsewhere, seems to reflect less its democratic shortcomings than persistent questions over strategic alignment and identity.

Institutional reforms needed

Treating enlargement as a security instrument, however, carries risks. Fast-tracking candidates for geopolitical reasons threatens to erode conditionality and undermine the legitimacy of the acquis. Ukraine's candidacy epitomises this dilemma: while its integration is regarded as essential European security, its reconstruction needs, economic fragility, and incomplete reforms raise difficult questions about absorption capacity (Besch & Ciaramella, 2023). For Türkiye, the opposite dynamic applies: strategic concerns, rather than normative shortcomings alone, explain the EU's reluctance to move forward.

A more layered model of conditionality is therefore emerging. Early stages emphasise foreign policy coordination and security alignment, while full acquis compliance and institutional reforms are deferred. This approach is evident in the Ukraine Facility and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (European Commission, 2024a, p. 2), and may soon be complemented by security compacts or defence pre-accession instruments that integrate candidate countries into the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

Yet enlargement as a strategic instrument cannot succeed without internal reform. The accession of Ukraine and other candidate countries would reshape voting dynamics, budgetary allocations, and institutional balances within the EU. Calls for extending qualified majority voting in foreign and security policy and for revising the EU's structural funds highlight the scale of these challenges (Csaky & Grant, 2025; Zorić, 2025).

Unless institutional reforms are enacted, strategic enlargement risks becoming either symbolically empty or hollow or destabilising in practice. The central challenge, therefore, is to reconcile the EU's dual identity—as a community of values and a geopolitical actor—so that future enlargements strengthen rather than dilute both its normative and strategic cohesion.

Methodology

This article employs a comparative case study approach (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2025) to analyse how geopolitical imperatives have reshaped the EU's enlargement policy. Türkiye and Ukraine are selected as the two focal cases. Both are large, geopolitically significant states with longstanding, yet remarkably different relationships with the EU. Türkiye has held official candidate status since 1999 and entered

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negotiations in 2005, while Ukraine obtained candidate status in 2022 and began accession negotiations in 2024 (European Council, 2024).

The analysis draws on a broad base of primary and secondary sources. Core materials include official EU documents, policy papers, accession reports, summit conclusions and Eurobarometer surveys. These are complemented by national government publications, statements by international organisations and international agreements. In addition, scholarly literature, policy briefs, and reputable news sources are employed to provide context, particularly concerning the most recent developments in both countries. This methodology highlights how the recent geopolitical developments in the EU's neighbourhood have altered the significance it placed on conditionality, security, and strategic alignment during the enlargement process. By focusing on the chosen two countries, the aim of this paper is to analyse how factors such as institutional trajectories, bilateral partnerships, and public attitudes influence the EU's strategic recalibration toward geopolitical realism.

Normative Reconsideration and Strategic Adaptability

25 years ago, Türkiye's accession was among the key steps in the EU's enlargement strategy. It received candidate status in 1999 and formally opened negotiations in 2005. Today, it symbolises the EU's complex dilemma between upholding its foundational values and accommodating strategic imperatives. Türkiye's accession momentum gradually slowed after the coup attempt in 2016, and by 2025, negotiations were effectively frozen. What remains of what was supposed to be one of the most significant additions to the EU is a strategic ambivalence, with neither the EU nor Ankara willing to officially revoke Türkiye's candidate status.

The early phase of Türkiye's candidacy was viewed with optimism, and an effort was made to adopt reforms to make Türkiye aligned with the Copenhagen criteria. However, this trajectory reversed after 2013, and decisively so after the failed coup attempt of July 2016. The ensuing state of emergency allowed sweeping purges across the military, judiciary, academia, and media. Restrictions on freedom of expression and political pluralism drew international criticism, including Amnesty International's documentation of mass arrests and dismissals (Amnesty International, 2016).

The 2017 constitutional referendum further consolidated presidential powers, eroding parliamentary checks and balances. The Venice Commission (2017) warned that these amendments undermined the separation of powers and judicial independence. Subsequent European Commission progress reports from 2018 to 2024 consistently highlighted democratic backsliding, shrinking space for civil society, and weakened rule of law. The European Parliament reiterated these concerns in its May 2025 resolutions (European Parliament, 2025).

Despite periodic gestures of rapprochement —most recently the 2024 Gymnich meeting where both sides signalled interest in renewed dialogue (Council of the European Union, 2024)—no road map for accession talks has materialised. Instead, EU policy has shifted toward "functional engagement" with Türkiye as a valuable partner through selective cooperation on issues such as customs union modernisation, climate policy alignment,

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and migration management, although without reference to full membership (European Commission, 2024b, 2025b).

Türkiye has become a liminal partner—too important to exclude, yet too divergent to integrate. Its stalled accession underscores both limits of conditionality when confronted with assertive sovereignty and the constraints of a meritocratic enlargement model in contexts shaped by identity politics and geopolitical ambivalence.

Ukraine's candidacy, by contrast, casts conditionality in a different light. Since gaining candidate status in 2022 and beginning negotiations in 2024, Ukraine has faced scrutiny over corruption, oligarchic influence, and judicial reform (Krupa, 2025). Yet, as Georg Vobruba (2025) observes, an urgency to solidify Ukraine's place in the European order required an alternative approach to the normative process. Taking a stance against Russian aggression immediately has moved concerns over incomplete reforms lower on the list of priorities.

However, this is not to say that the conditionality principle has been abandoned entirely. Rather, it represents a reconsideration of priorities for the foreseeable future. As Keil (2023) argues, a geopolitical approach to enlargement adds the geopolitical imperative as a factor in assessing the candidate's progress. It does not negate the original normative, values-based framework. Ukraine's trajectory represents this "sequenced conditionality," which places institutional reforms within a broader geopolitically-driven integration process. This enlargement framework prioritises alignment with EU security and foreign policy, as these have a global impact, while the more extensive national-level democratic and judicial reforms are to be adopted progressively once the situation becomes more stable.

Security Cooperation and Geopolitical Strategy

Türkiye's balancing act between strategic significance and normative misalignment places it at a critical juncture in EU enlargement politics. Despite divergences, Türkiye remains indispensable to the EU, playing pivotal roles in migration management, regional security in the Eastern Mediterranean, and energy transit. Its expanding defence industry, especially the internationally lauded Bayraktar UAVs, further strengthens its appeal (Çelik, 2021; Franke, 2025; Witt, 2022).

From the EU's perspective, however, this strategic utility has not translated into renewed accession momentum. Key member states, notably France and Austria, remain sceptical, citing governance concerns but also cultural apprehensions regarding Türkiye's predominantly Muslim identity and demographic weight (Handy, 2023).

Concurrently, Türkiye has recalibrated its external posture by diversifying alliances beyond the Euro-Atlantic framework. In 2024, it applied for BRICS membership (*Turkey seeks to join the BRICS bloc of emerging economies, a Kremlin official says*, 2024) and was granted "partner country" status (*BRICS offers Turkey 'partner country' status, Turkish trade minister says*, 2024). Ankara has also deepened ties with non-Western powers, including China through renewed currency swap arrangements (Central Bank of the Republic of Türkiye, 2025), Russia (Avcıoğlu, 2025), Pakistan (Rakipoğlu et al., 2025), and Indonesia (Alpay, 2025). It has also renewed relations with the Arab League

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and generally focused its foreign policy on bilateral defence and trade agreements. While not necessarily precluding continued cooperation with the EU, these moves do signal Ankara's intent to decrease Türkiye's dependence on the EU. Notably, Türkiye's interest in BRICS and its increasing involvement in such platforms indicate a shift to transactional diplomacy, prioritising autonomy and pragmatic cooperation over long-term normative integration. This strategic reorientation has rendered Türkiye's candidate status a symbolic gesture, further complicating EU-Türkiye relations.

Because Ukraine's accession has been motivated by an unprecedented security crisis, it necessitates an unprecedented exception. While the Copenhagen criteria—democratic governance, market economy, and acquis communautaire compliance—are traditionally used to evaluate candidates, Ukraine's extraordinary circumstances of Russia's full-scale invasion launched in February 2022 have prompted the EU to reframe enlargement as an instrument of geopolitical resilience. Consequently, Ukraine has become a "test case" for a security-centric approach to accession, which allows for certain flexibility of normativity.

The strategic rationale behind Ukraine's candidacy is increasingly rooted in its frontline status in the defence of Europe's post-Cold War security order. Following the invasion, EU rhetoric shifted from procedural conditionality to solidarity, asserting Ukraine's membership as a de facto security guarantee in a context where NATO enlargement remains stalled (Besch & Ciaramella, 2023).

This shift was institutionalised by the European Council's decision to grant Ukraine candidate status in June 2022 (Polityuk & Hnidyi, 2022) and to open accession negotiations in 2024 (European Council, 2024). Although Ukraine remains a state at war, its integration has been legitimised through appeals to resilience, sacrifice, and perceived European identity. Furthermore, its contribution to European defence—especially in cyber-security and unmanned systems—reinforces its standing within Europe's strategic architecture (Braun et al., 2024).

Economy or Strategy?

One of the most contentious aspects of Ukraine's candidacy lies in its economic implications. According to the World Bank, Ukraine's reconstruction needs are estimated at $524 billion (World Bank, 2025), with EU contributions since 2022 already exceeding €186 billion (Administration Team of the EU Delegation to the United States, 2025). These commitments have provoked debate over fiscal solidarity, budgetary priorities, and public support across member states.

Yet the prevailing narrative increasingly frames Ukraine not as an economic liability but as a strategic investment in European resilience. Ukraine's vast agricultural base, critical raw materials, and gas reserves offer pathways to reduce EU dependence on third-country suppliers (Tombiński, 2023). Its alignment with EU energy, digital and transport policies also promises to enhance the Union's long-term competitiveness. This vision of complementarity has sustained political will, even amid enlargement fatigue and growing populist backlash.

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Türkiye, while sidelined in terms of formal accession, remains deeply embedded in the EU's economic and strategic orbit. Despite frozen negotiations, Ankara continues to seek visa liberation[2] and the modernisation of the Customs Union, which has been in force since 1995. In practice, EU-Türkiye relations have evolved into a selective partnership, with cooperation in trade, migration, counterterrorism, public health, climate, energy, transport, and regional security (European Commission, 2024a, 2024b). Trade ties remain robust. In 2022, Türkiye ranked as the EU's seventh-largest trading partner, accounting for 3.3% (EUR 198.33 billion) of the EU's total goods trade. This share increased to 4.1% (EUR 206 billion) in 2023 (European Commission, 2023, p. 131, 2024b, pp. 4, 48). By late 2024, EU reports reiterated that Türkiye's importance in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern stability, as well as its economic potential to bolster EU competitiveness.

The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) has further highlighted Türkiye's defence industry, noting its capacity to produce cost-effective unmanned systems, precision-guided munitions, and electronic warfare tools as an asset to Europe's security posture, especially given the ongoing war in Ukraine (Kurç et al., 2024). Some tentative warming in political dialogue was evident at the already mentioned Gymnich meeting in 2024, where both sides reaffirmed interest in re-engagement.

Credibility Questioned: Public Opinion, Identity, and Enlargement Politics

Public opinion has long functioned as both a mirror and a constraint on the European Union's enlargement strategy. While officially presented as a technocratic process centred on compliance with the Copenhagen criteria, enlargement has always been politically contingent – shaped by domestic electorates in member states (Zorić, 2025). As Kaźmierkiewicz (2006a, pp. 25–27) noted two decades ago, support or opposition to candidate countries often aligns with public perceptions of their nationals, shaped by cultural ties, linguistic proximity, diasporas, and economic reputation. Elite consensus may drive formal decisions, but sustained popular support is essential for legitimacy and viability. The widening gap between strategic imperatives and public sentiment has thus emerged as a critical variable in the Union's external engagement.

The Eurobarometer data have consistently highlighted significant variation in public support for candidate countries. Early surveys from 2006 already showed a marked preference for EFTA states, such as Norway, Switzerland, and Iceland, that were perceived culturally and economically proximate, whereas Türkiye and Albania received far lower approval (Standard Eurobarometer 64, 2006, p. 137). Two enduring explanatory dimensions account for this divergence: cultural-religious affinity and economic perception.

The first dimension, cultural-religious identity, has been theorised as "bounded Europeanism," wherein support for enlargement depends on perceived civilisational

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[2] On 18 July 205, the EU eased rules for Turks to use its open-border Schengen area. This means that Turks now will be eligible for a six-month visa, as well as one-year, three-year and five-year multiple-entry visas (*EU Eases Schengen Visa Rules for Turks; Envoy Urges Further Moves*, 2025).

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compatibility. This has been particularly salient in attitudes towards Türkiye. As a predominantly Muslim country, Türkiye's candidacy has often triggered anxieties about Europe's cultural coherence, especially in countries with entrenched Christian heritage narratives (Kaźmierkiewicz, 2006a). The second was the economy. Wealthier states such as Norway and Switzerland were viewed favourably, while poorer candidates received less support. Interestingly, Ukraine, despite its weaker economy, ranked ahead of states with Muslim populations, suggesting that cultural-religious identity weighed more heavily than economic capacity in public perceptions (Kaźmierkiewicz, 2006a, p. 19). Other economically poorer nations, such as Serbia, also attracted relatively less resistance (Kaźmierkiewicz, 2006a, p. 19).

This pattern persists in more recent data, as the IPSOS survey for *Euronews* confirms that Ukraine enjoys significantly more public support for accession (45%) than Türkiye (24%), despite its current military and economic fragility (Cantone, 2024). Although the GDP of Türkiye is USD 1.44 trillion and the GDP of Ukraine is USD 205.74 billion as of April 2025 (*GDP per Capita, Current Prices*, 2025), Türkiye's large economy has not translated into higher support. Ukraine, despite its war-induced economic collapse, benefits from a narrative of solidarity and security rather than economic self-sufficiency.

There also seems to be a new trend emerging. According to the 2025 European Parliament Winter Survey, 66% of respondents identified the EU's protective role amid global insecurity, and 36% named defence and security as top policy areas (*EP Winter 2025 Survey - Results Annex*, 2025). These trends suggest that public opinion—once primarily reactive to economic fears and cultural stereotypes—is being reshaped by a heightened awareness of security interdependence and that enlargement is no longer perceived merely as a technocratic process. It ranks now as the second most important action to strengthen the EU's global role, following only the euro, and ahead of defence.

Conclusion

This article has examined the evolving character of EU enlargement policy, tracing the shift from a primarily normative process of democratic and economic transformation to one where geopolitical strategy, security and resilience increasingly take priority. The comparative analysis of Türkiye and Ukraine, two large, strategically significant, but differently politically positioned candidate countries, has demonstrated that enlargement no longer functions exclusively for its original purpose of promoting democracy. It has also become an essential mechanism for protecting stability in the region and enhancing the EU's strategic autonomy.

Türkiye's trajectory demonstrates the limitations of conditionality. Once envisioned as the point where Europe meets the Muslim world, its accession process has stalled due to serious democratic backsliding and normative divergence, resulting in mutual ambivalence. Its gradual yet undeniable reorientation toward alternative geopolitical frameworks such as BRICS and closer ties with Russia, China, and the Arab League signal its pivot to a transactional, multipolar diplomacy. Yet the relationship with the EU remains too important for both parties—economically, militarily, and geographically—to be severed entirely.

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Conversely, Ukraine's candidacy under exceptional circumstances places geopolitics and security at the top of the EU's enlargement agenda. It emphasises the necessity of binding Ukraine to the EU in order to protect its eastern border and deter further acts of aggression from Russia. Ukraine has thus become the first candidate where the new security-driven model of enlargement is being applied. Whether Ukraine becomes an EU member, however, will depend on multiple factors, including the resolution of the war and subsequent post-war reconstruction, institutional reforms, and sustained public and fiscal solidarity across the EU.

Public opinion in particular will be the decisive factor in Ukraine's integration. As the comparison over two decades shows, cultural and religious perceptions remain virtually unchanged since the earliest surveys: Türkiye continues to face opposition driven by identity and political arguments, while Ukraine's accession is seen as an existential necessity, supported by official expressions of solidarity. The persistence of these asymmetries highlights that democratic societies of the EU will not sustain enlargement policies that are culturally selective or normatively inconsistent.

The main argument that has been developed in this paper is that while enlargement used to be the EU's most powerful instrument of liberal teleology in the past, it is now being repurposed as a cornerstone of its strategic autonomy. Yet this shift is not without risks and requires careful balancing. If security imperatives take precedence over democratic conditionality long-term, the EU risks disregarding the very principles and values that underlie its legitimacy. To be sustainable, future enlargement must therefore balance strategic resilience and foundational values. This requires a different approach to the accession process. The early stages would focus on security, economic convergence, and sectoral integration, while democratic governance and rule of law remain the end goal.

In conclusion, Türkiye and Ukraine exemplify two divergent but complementary trajectories to EU membership. Türkiye represents the EU's struggle to integrate a large, Muslim-majority state whose democratic credentials and rule of law have deteriorated, yet its strategic value remains too important to lose. Ukraine represents what seems to be the future of enlargement, a new model characterised by a reconsideration of priorities, resulting in an accelerated accession due to geopolitical urgency. Both cases present a central normative lesson: candidates must be assessed based on the same criteria, regardless of religion or identity. Türkiye should not be excluded simply because it is Muslim, nor should Ukraine be integrated without a credible path to democratic consolidation because it is at war. To do otherwise is to compromise the meritocratic nature of the accession process.

The future of enlargement thus lies in a hybrid paradigm, based on foundational values yet guided by interests. If the process remains strategically sensible and normatively just, the EU will be able to maintain its transformational capacity and position itself as a key player in the multipolar international order. When viewed through this new lens, the enlargement process is about more than just membership; it is also about defining Europe's strategic future

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