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European Union Enlargement

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European Union Enlargement

The European Union (EU) is a unique political and economic partnership. The EU is the latest stage in a process of integration begun after World War II, initially by six Western European countries, to promote peace, political stability, and economic prosperity in Europe. The carefully managed process of enlargement is one of the EU's most powerful policy tools; over the years, it has helped transform many European states into functioning democracies and more affluent countries. After the end of the Cold War, the EU worked with the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) to reform their political systems and economies in order to meet EU standards. In 2004, EU membership grew from 15 to 25 countries, bringing in most CEE states. Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007, and Croatia acceded in 2013. Following the withdrawal of the United Kingdom (UK) from the EU in 2020 (known as *Brexit*), the EU currently consists of 27 member states.

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Current EU Candidates and Future Aspirants

The EU maintains that the enlargement door remains open to any European country that fulfills the EU's political and economic criteria for membership. At the same time, EU enlargement is also very much a political process; almost all significant steps on the long path to accession require the unanimous agreement of the existing EU member states. As such, a prospective EU candidate's relationships or conflicts with individual member states may influence the country's EU accession prospects and timeline.

The EU currently recognizes five countries as official candidates for membership: Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (all in the Western Balkans), as well as Turkey. All five countries are at different stages of the accession process. At present, Montenegro and Serbia are farthest along in their accession negotiations. The EU decided to open accession talks with Turkey in 2005, but progress in the negotiations has been slow and negotiations with Turkey have been essentially frozen since 2018 amid heightened tensions with the EU about democratic backsliding in the country, disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean, and other issues. Although the EU approved opening accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in March 2020, the two countries have encountered hurdles in advancing to the next step. The EU also considers the remaining two Western Balkan states of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo to be potential future EU candidates.

Despite the EU's professed commitment to enlargement, some EU policymakers and many EU citizens are cautious about additional expansion, especially to Turkey or countries farther east, such as Georgia or Ukraine, in the longer term. Concerns about continued EU enlargement range from fears of unwanted labor migration to the implications of an ever-expanding union on the EU's institutions, finances, and overall identity. Such reservations are particularly apparent toward Turkey, given its large size, predominantly Muslim population, and comparatively less prosperous economy.

U.S. and Congressional Interests

Although the United States does not have a direct role in the process of EU enlargement, successive U.S. Administrations and many Members of Congress have supported the bloc's expansion. Most U.S. policymakers regard EU enlargement as serving U.S. interests by advancing democracy, peace, and economic opportunity throughout the European continent. Over the years, one of the only significant U.S. criticisms of the EU's enlargement process has been that the EU was moving too slowly. Some U.S. officials are concerned that *enlargement fatigue*—or declining political and public enthusiasm within the EU for further expansion—could slow future rounds of EU enlargement.

The Biden Administration has expressed continued support for EU enlargement into the Western Balkans and may view the accession process as a tool to promote stability and reforms in a region that has strategic importance for various U.S. interests. In particular, growing concern over Russia's and China's global influence may underscore the importance of anchoring the Western Balkans in the EU. The Administration also may seek to increase cooperation with the EU in the Western Balkans and Turkey as part of broader efforts to strengthen transatlantic alignment on global challenges. In addition, the Administration's pledge to make global democracy and human rights a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy may motivate an increased focus on these issues—which are requirements for EU accession—in candidate and potential candidate countries. For similar reasons, the status of EU enlargement and its implications for both the EU itself and U.S.-EU relations may be of interest to Members of Congress. For additional information on the EU, see CRS Report RS21372, *The European Union: Questions and Answers*, by Kristin Archick.

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Overview

The European Union (EU) is a political and economic partnership that represents a unique form of cooperation among 27 member states today. Backed by successive U.S. Administrations and many Members of Congress, the EU regards the enlargement process as a historic opportunity to further the integration of the continent by peaceful means. The carefully managed process of enlargement is one of the EU's most powerful policy tools; it has helped transform former dictatorships such as Spain and many of the former communist states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) into stable democracies and free market economies.

The EU maintains that the enlargement door remains open to any European country that fulfills the EU's political and economic criteria for membership. The EU currently recognizes five countries as official candidates—Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (all in the Western Balkans), as well as Turkey.¹ The EU regards the remaining two Western Balkan countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as potential future candidates for membership. (See map in **Figure 1**.)

At the same time, EU enlargement may be reaching its limits, both geographically and in light of what some view as *enlargement fatigue*—declining political and public enthusiasm within the EU for further expansion. Some European leaders and publics have long harbored reservations about Turkey's possible accession, in particular. Democratic backsliding in some EU member states and aspirants may be contributing to apprehensions about enlargement. France and several other EU members also have voiced concerns recently about the enlargement process, prompting revisions to it in early 2020.

In addition, the EU has faced numerous internal and external challenges over the past decade that have preoccupied the bloc, exposed divisions among existing member states, and called into question the EU's future shape and character. The 2008-2009 global recession and the subsequent European financial crisis helped foster increased political fragmentation and the rise of anti-EU (or *euroskeptic*) political parties in many EU countries. The 2015-2016 European migration and refugee crisis significantly tested EU solidarity and continues to have political and societal ramifications for many EU countries. The United Kingdom (UK) withdrew as a member of the EU on January 31, 2020 (known as *Brexit*). The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has deeply affected European economies and societies and is consuming a considerable amount of policymakers' time and attention.

Many in the EU argue that continued EU enlargement remains necessary to promote stability and reconciliation in the Western Balkans; to ward off Russian, Chinese, or other foreign influences; and to reaffirm Turkey's position as a key European partner. Although EU-Turkey relations are currently tense and Turkey's EU membership prospects appear distant amid stalled accession negotiations, the EU has expressed a renewed commitment to the Western Balkans. In March 2020, the EU approved launching accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, a decision regarded as a key step forward for these two countries on a still-long road to EU membership. Accession talks, however, have yet to begin for either candidate due to various objections raised by certain member states over the past year. An ongoing dispute between North Macedonia and EU member Bulgaria continues to stymie the opening of accession negotiations

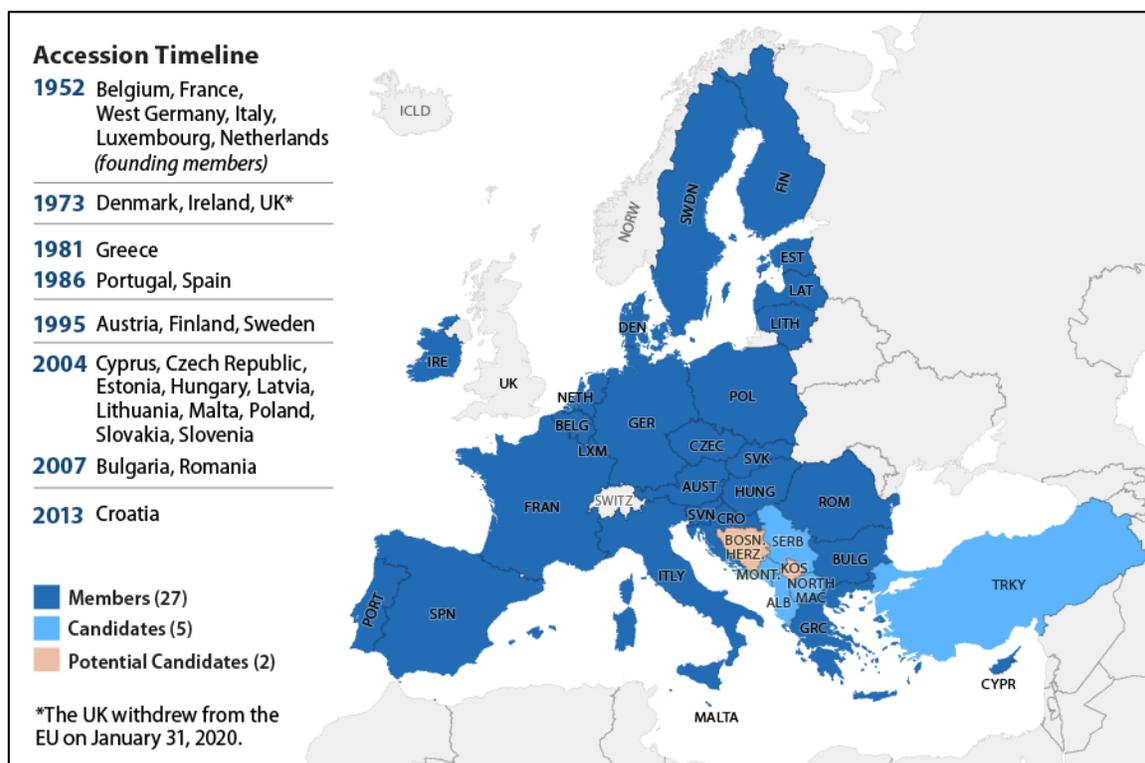
¹ North Macedonia adopted the constitutional name *Republic of North Macedonia* in 2019 as part of the 2018 Prespa Agreement with Greece (see "Albania and North Macedonia: Awaiting Accession Talks"). The country's prior constitutional name was *Republic of Macedonia*. For clarity, this report refers to the country as *North Macedonia* throughout.

for both Albania and North Macedonia, whose membership bids the EU has linked in recent years.

Historically, U.S. support has helped bolster the European integration project. After the end of the Cold War, successive U.S. Administrations and many Members of Congress were key advocates of EU enlargement (as well as NATO enlargement). U.S. officials viewed EU enlargement as crucial to ensuring democratic governance, the rule of law, and economic prosperity throughout CEE. They also hoped the twin processes of EU and NATO enlargement would help prevent a strategic vacuum in CEE and firmly entrench the region's countries in Euro-Atlantic institutions and the U.S.-led liberal international order. The United States and many in Congress traditionally supported the EU membership aspirations of Turkey and the countries of the Western Balkans for similar reasons.

Since entering office in 2021, the Biden Administration has offered U.S. support for EU enlargement. The Administration also is seeking to strengthen transatlantic coordination on challenges in candidate and potential candidate countries. Many Members of Congress remain broadly supportive of EU enlargement, especially to the Western Balkans amid growing concerns about Russian and Chinese activities in the region. As in the past, some U.S. officials appear frustrated with delays in the EU accession process and concerned it is proceeding too slowly.

Figure 1. The European Union
Member States and Aspirant Countries



Source: CRS.

Notes: West Germany and East Germany were unified in 1990.

Iceland formally applied for EU membership in 2009 and was recognized as a candidate country in 2010, but accession negotiations have been on hold since 2013. In 2015, Iceland requested to no longer be regarded as a candidate country.

Evolution of the European Union

The EU is the latest stage in a process of European integration aimed at promoting peace, political stability, and economic prosperity throughout the European continent. The EU and its predecessor institutions have been built over several decades through a series of binding treaties (see **Figure 2**). The current 27-member EU has a population of nearly 450 million.

Origins

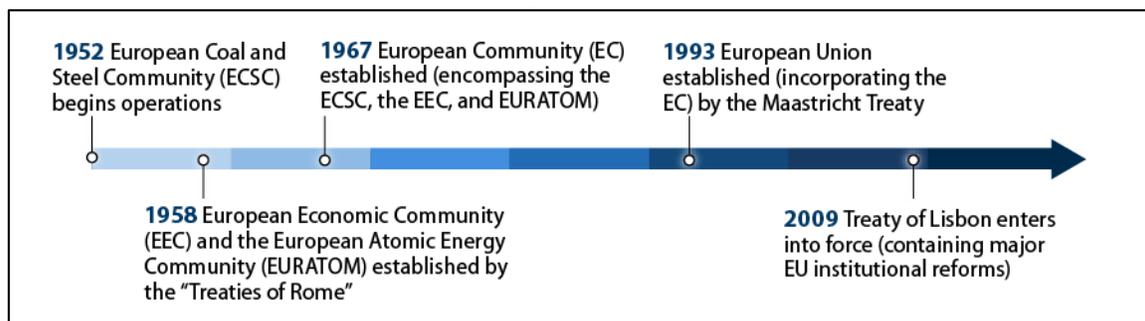
After World War II, leaders in Western Europe were anxious to secure long-term peace and stability in Europe and to create a favorable environment for economic growth and recovery. In 1951, six states—Belgium, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), France, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands—decided to establish the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), a single market in these two industrial sectors controlled by an independent supranational authority. Its founders hoped that the ECSC would help control the raw materials of war and promote economic interdependence, thus making another conflict in Europe unthinkable. The ECSC began operations in 1952.

In 1957, the six ECSC member states signed two new treaties in Rome: the first established the European Economic Community (EEC) to develop common economic policies and merge the separate national markets into a single market in which goods, people, capital, and services could move freely; the second created a European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) to ensure the use of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. These two treaties, commonly referred to as the “Treaties of Rome,” came into force in 1958. In 1967, the ECSC, the EEC, and EURATOM collectively became known as the European Community (EC).

The EC first added new members in 1973, with the entry of the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark. Greece joined in 1981, followed by Spain and Portugal in 1986. The Single European Act modified the EC treaties in 1987 to facilitate the creation of the single market, introduced institutional reforms, and increased the powers of the fledgling European Parliament. At the beginning of 1993, the near completion of the single market brought about the mostly free movement of goods, people, capital, and services within the EC.

Figure 2. The European Integration Project

Key Milestones



Source: CRS.

Notes: Dates reflect when treaties establishing the resulting entities entered into force.

Birth of the EU

On November 1, 1993, the Treaty on European Union (also known as the Maastricht Treaty) entered into force, establishing the modern-day European Union and encompassing the EC. The Maastricht Treaty established an EU consisting of three pillars: an expanded and strengthened EC; a common foreign and security policy; and common internal security measures. The Maastricht Treaty also contained provisions that resulted in the creation of an Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), including a common European currency (the euro).² The European Union was intended as a significant step on the path toward not only greater economic integration but also closer political cooperation.

On January 1, 1995, Austria, Finland, and Sweden joined the EU, bringing membership to 15 member states. In 1997, EU leaders met to review the Maastricht Treaty and consider the future course of European integration. The resulting Amsterdam Treaty, which took effect in 1999, enhanced the legislative powers of the European Parliament, sought to strengthen the EU's foreign policy, and aimed to further integrate internal security policies.

In 2000, EU leaders concluded the Nice Treaty to pave the way for further EU enlargement, primarily to Europe's east. Entering into force in 2003, the Nice Treaty set out internal, institutional reforms to enable the Union to accept new members and still be able to operate effectively. In particular, it extended the majority voting system in the EU's Council of Ministers (representing the member states) to a number of additional policy areas that had previously required unanimity, and restructured the European Commission (the EU's executive).

The 2004 Enlargement and Subsequent Accessions

After the end of the Cold War, the EU worked with the former communist countries of CEE to reform their political systems and economies in order to meet the EU's membership criteria. The EU viewed enlargement to Europe's east as fulfilling a historic pledge to further the integration of the continent by peaceful means and overcome decades of artificial division. In 1998 and 1999, the EU began accession negotiations with 12 candidate countries (including Cyprus and Malta, which also had expressed interest in joining the EU).

In December 2002, the EU concluded accession talks with 10 countries: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The accession treaty was signed with these 10 countries in April 2003, and the countries acceded to the EU on May 1, 2004—increasing the number of EU member states to 25. In December 2004, the EU completed accession negotiations with Bulgaria and Romania, despite some continued EU concerns about the status of judicial reforms and anti-corruption efforts in both countries. Bulgaria and Romania formally joined the EU on January 1, 2007.³ Croatia acceded on July 1, 2013, bringing the union to 28 member states.

² On January 1, 1999, 11 EU member states were the first to adopt the single European currency—the euro—and banks and many businesses began using the euro as a unit of account. Euro notes and coins replaced national currencies in participating states on January 1, 2002. Participating countries also have a common central bank and a common monetary policy. Today, 19 of the EU's 27 member states use the euro: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain.

³ The EU continues to monitor the progress of Romania and Bulgaria in bolstering the rule of law and combating corruption and (for Bulgaria) organized crime until certain benchmarks are met. See European Commission, *Cooperation and Verification Mechanism for Bulgaria and Romania*, at https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/upholding-rule-law/rule-law/assistance-bulgaria-and-romania-under-cvm/cooperation-and-verification-mechanism-bulgaria-and-romania_en.

The 2009 Lisbon Treaty

Although the Nice Treaty sought to introduce institutional reforms to allow an enlarged EU to function better and more effectively, critics asserted that the treaty established a more complex, less efficient decisionmaking process. In light of the criticisms of the Nice Treaty, the EU embarked on a new institutional reform effort in 2002. This process culminated on December 1, 2009, when the Lisbon Treaty came into force.

The Lisbon Treaty contained significant structural changes to further streamline the EU's governing institutions and decisionmaking processes. It introduced several new leadership positions and additional reforms to the EU's majority voting system. Other key goals of the Lisbon Treaty were to enhance the EU's role as a foreign policy actor and to increase democracy and transparency within the EU, in part by granting more powers to the European Parliament. (See the **text box** for information on the role and responsibilities of the EU's key institutions.)



Key EU Institutions

The **European Council** serves as the strategic guide for EU policy. It is composed of the Heads of State or Government of the EU's member states and the President of the European Commission; it meets several times a year in what are often termed *EU summits*. The European Council is headed by a President, currently Charles Michel, who organizes the council's work and facilitates consensus.

The **European Commission** functions as the EU's executive and upholds the common interest of the EU as a whole. It implements and manages EU decisions and common policies, ensures the provisions of the EU's treaties are carried out properly, and has the sole right of legislative initiative in most policy areas. It is composed of 27 Commissioners, one from each country; each Commissioner holds a distinct portfolio (e.g., agriculture, trade, EU enlargement). One Commissioner serves as Commission President, currently Ursula von der Leyen.

The **Council of the European Union** (or **Council of Ministers**) represents the national governments. It enacts legislation, usually based on proposals put forward by the European Commission and agreed to (in most cases) by the European Parliament. In a few sensitive areas, such as foreign policy, the Council of Ministers holds sole decisionmaking authority. Different ministers participate in council meetings depending on the subject (e.g., foreign ministers would meet to discuss the Middle East, agriculture ministers to discuss farm subsidies). The Presidency of the Council rotates among the member states every six months. Slovenia holds the presidency from July to December 2021; France is scheduled to hold the presidency from January to June 2022.

The **European Parliament (EP)** represents the citizens of the EU. The EP shares responsibility for enacting most EU legislation with the Council of Ministers and decides on the allocation of the EU's budget jointly with the European Council. It currently consists of 705 members who are directly elected in the member states for five-year terms. The most recent EP elections were in May 2019. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) caucus according to political affiliation rather than nationality. The current President of the EP is David Sassoli.

Brexit⁴

On January 31, 2020, the UK withdrew from the EU, ending its 47-year membership in the European integration project. Brexit followed a 2016 public referendum in the UK in which voters narrowly favored leaving the EU by 52% to 48%. Under the withdrawal agreement negotiated by the two sides, the UK continued to apply EU rules during a transition period until the end of 2020. In late December 2020, the EU and the UK concluded a new Trade and

⁴ Also see CRS Report R46730, *Brexit: Overview, Trade, and Northern Ireland*, coordinated by Derek E. Mix.

Cooperation Agreement to govern future trade and economic relations, as well as cooperation on a range of other issues.

Process of Enlargement

Membership Criteria and Key Steps

According to the Maastricht Treaty, any European country may apply for EU membership if it subscribes to EU values. EU member states defined the core political and economic criteria for new members at a meeting in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1993. The so-called *Copenhagen criteria* require candidates to have stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities; a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with market forces within the EU; and the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic, and monetary union. The EU also asserts that the process of enlargement must take into account the bloc's "absorption" or "integration" capacity and not endanger the EU's ability to function effectively.⁵

A country's application to join the EU triggers a complex technical process and a sequence of evaluation procedures. At the same time, EU enlargement is very much a political process; most steps on the path to accession require the unanimous agreement of existing member states. As such, a prospective EU candidate's relationships or conflicts with individual member states may influence the country's EU accession progress and timeline (see summary in **text box**).

Following the submission of a given country's application, the European Commission issues a formal opinion on the aspirant country and the extent to which it meets the Copenhagen criteria and is ready to join the EU. All member states, acting in the Council of the EU (Council of Ministers), must recognize the applicant country as an official EU candidate. The European Commission and the Council of the EU (acting unanimously) then must approve the opening of accession negotiations and adopt a negotiating framework, which establishes the general guidelines for the enlargement talks. Following the adoption of the negotiating framework, accession talks may begin.

Accession negotiations are a long process in which the candidate country must adopt and implement a massive body of EU treaties, laws, and regulations. This extensive body of EU rules



EU Accession Process: Main Stages

Stage 1: Aspirant country applies to join the EU.

Stage 2: EU member states decide unanimously to recognize the aspirant as an official candidate for membership.

Stage 3: EU member states decide unanimously to open accession negotiations with the candidate country and adopt a negotiating framework to guide accession talks.

Stage 4: Candidate country and the EU begin accession negotiations on adopting all EU rules and regulations (the *acquis communautaire*).

Stage 5: Candidate country and the EU conclude negotiations on all chapters of the *acquis*. EU member states and the European Parliament subsequently approve the accession treaty.

Stage 6: Candidate country and EU member states sign and ratify the accession treaty.

Stage 7: Candidate country accedes to the EU.

⁵ European Commission, "Conditions for Membership," at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/conditions-membership_en.

and regulations is known as the *acquis communautaire*. For the accession process, the *acquis* is divided into 35 subject-related negotiating “chapters” that range from free movement of goods to agriculture to competition. Detailed negotiations take place at the ministerial level to establish the terms under which applicant countries will adopt and implement the rules in each chapter. The European Commission proposes common negotiating positions for the EU on each chapter and conducts the negotiations on behalf of the EU. Enlargement policy and accession negotiations are directed and led by the European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement (currently Olivér Várhelyi).

In all areas of the *acquis*, the candidate country must bring its institutions, management capacity, and administrative and judicial systems up to EU standards, at both national and regional levels. During negotiations, applicants may request transition periods for complying with certain EU rules. All candidate countries receive financial assistance from the EU, mainly to aid in the accession process.

Chapters of the *acquis* can be opened and closed only with the unanimous approval of all existing EU member states acting in the Council of the EU. Periodically, the European Commission issues “progress” reports to the Council of the EU and the European Parliament assessing the achievements in the candidate countries. Once the European Commission concludes negotiations on all chapters with an applicant, the agreements reached are incorporated into a draft accession treaty, which must be approved by the Council of the EU and the European Parliament. After the EU and the candidate country sign the accession treaty, each EU member state and the candidate country must ratify the treaty; this process typically takes one to two years.⁶

Recent Changes

Many consider EU enlargement to be a uniquely effective democracy-promotion tool.⁷ Nevertheless, the enlargement process has faced criticism. Among other issues, critics note the politicization of enlargement decisionmaking within the EU (some member states have used the accession process as a forum to address bilateral disputes with candidate countries). Others have questioned the longer-term durability of EU accession-related reforms, citing current concerns over democratic backsliding and weakening rule of law in member states such as Hungary and Poland, as well as assessments that corruption and democratic deficits persist and may have worsened in some candidate countries.⁸

Following pressure from France and several other member states, the EU adopted some changes to the enlargement process in early 2020. French President Emmanuel Macron in particular called for reforming the EU’s enlargement process before further expansion. According to the European Commission, the revision “aims to make the enlargement process more credible, predictable, dynamic, and subject to stronger political steering.”⁹ Among other changes, the new measures are to incorporate greater member state input and oversight, organize negotiating chapters into thematic clusters, and situate a new “fundamentals” cluster (encompassing the rule of law, the economy, and public administration) at the center of the accession process. The changes also

⁶ Also see European Commission, “EU Enlargement Factsheet,” at https://ec.europa.eu/neighborhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/publication/factsheet_en.pdf.

⁷ Milada Anna Vachudova, “The EU’s Eastward Enlargement and the Illiberal Turn,” *Current History*, vol. 118, no. 806 (March 2019), pp. 90-95.

⁸ Milica Delevic and Tena Prelec, “Flatter and Faster: New Western Balkan Pathways to the EU,” European Council on Foreign Relations, October 24, 2019 (hereinafter, Delevic and Prelec, “Flatter and Faster”).

⁹ European Commission, “Revised Enlargement Methodology: Questions and Answers,” February 5, 2020.

include new tools to reward progress and sanction stagnation or backsliding, including slowing down the process and adjusting assistance levels.

Many observers view these revisions to the enlargement process as a concession to secure support for launching accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. France and other member states (including the Netherlands and Denmark) had declined to approve opening accession talks with these two candidate countries on several occasions, despite support from the European Commission and praise for reform progress in both countries.¹⁰ Although many European officials and analysts have welcomed the broad aims behind the changes to the enlargement process, some caution that the delays in the accession talks—and failure to swiftly reward candidate countries that have undertaken difficult EU-sought reforms—have damaged the EU’s credibility in the Western Balkans and could leave some countries in the region more susceptible to Russian and Chinese influence. Some EU officials and U.S. policymakers also expressed concern that the delays would send a negative signal to candidate and potential candidate countries and could weaken reform momentum.¹¹

Following the approval of the changes in the enlargement process, in March 2020, all 27 EU member states approved opening accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. The revised enlargement measures will be included in the EU negotiation frameworks for the two countries. Although the new enlargement methodology was optional for Montenegro and Serbia, governments in both countries stated that they would opt to apply it to their negotiations.¹²

Current EU Candidates

Of the five countries that are currently official candidates for EU membership, four are in the Western Balkans—Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Turkey also is an official candidate country. All five candidate countries are at different stages of the accession process (**Figure 3**) and face varying issues and challenges.¹³

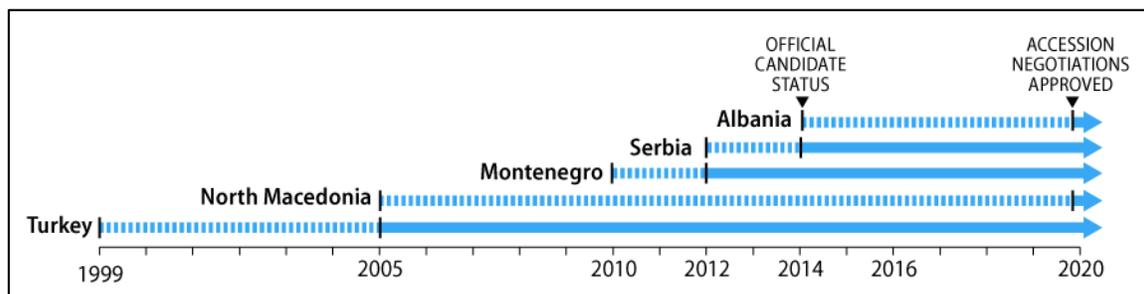
¹⁰ Georgi Gotev, “Netherlands to Veto the Opening of Accession Negotiations with Albania,” *EurActiv*, June 22, 2018; Hans von der Burchard, Jacopo Barigazzi, and Andrew Gray, “Brussels Puts French Accent on EU Enlargement,” *Politico Europe*, February 4, 2020.

¹¹ Robin Emmott, Francesco Guarascio, and Marine Penner, “France Under Fire for ‘Historic Error’ of Blocking Balkan EU Hopes,” Reuters, October 18, 2019; Vessela Tcherneva and Tara Varma, *After the French Veto: The New Scramble for the Western Balkans*, European Council on Foreign Relations, October 25, 2019; Aleksandar Ivkovic, “New Enlargement Methodology: It Will Work Only If Used Properly,” *European Western Balkans*, February 11, 2020; Marek Dabrowski, “Can the EU Overcome Its Enlargement Impasse?,” Bruegel, February 27, 2020.

¹² “EC Welcomes Montenegro’s Acceptance of the New Methodology,” *European Western Balkans Blog*, May 18, 2020; Radomir Ralev, “Serbia Accepts New Methodology in EU Accession Talks—President Vucic,” *SeeNews*, July 10, 2020.

¹³ For more detailed background on the EU’s relationship with each candidate country and the status of negotiations, see European Commission, European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, “Check Current Status,” at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/check-current-status_en.

Figure 3. Current EU Candidates
Timeline of Official Candidate Status and Accession Negotiations



Source: CRS.

Notes: At times, there may be a lag between the EU's decision to approve the opening of accession negotiations and the actual beginning of those accession negotiations. The EU approved opening accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia in March 2020; as of mid-2021, these talks have not begun.

Turkey remains an official candidate, but accession negotiations have been effectively frozen since 2018.

The Western Balkans¹⁴

During the 1990s, Yugoslavia's dissolution brought instability—and Europe's most lethal conflicts since World War II—to the EU's doorstep. The early EU response to the conflicts was widely regarded as ineffectual, and U.S.-led NATO intervention ultimately played a decisive role in halting the violence. In the late 1990s, as the last major conflict (the Kosovo war) ended, the EU sought to promote regional peace and stability by offering a prospective path to membership. Many European policymakers concurred that Western Balkan countries ultimately belong in the EU by virtue of their geography, history, and deep linkages to the bloc. Enlargement proponents asserted that the financial and institutional costs of absorbing the region, which has a combined population of roughly 18 million, would be comparatively low.¹⁵

Pressured by broad domestic support for EU membership, Western Balkan governments elevated EU accession as a strategic priority during the 2000s. To a degree, the prospect of EU membership helped channel political energies away from the often-illiberal discourse of the 1990s and served as an anchor for democratic reforms in the region.¹⁶ EU-linked reform agendas provided a source of continuity across government transitions and periods of domestic instability. In some parts of the region, EU membership is a shared goal for which support transcends deep-seeded domestic divisions.

Nevertheless, EU enlargement into the Western Balkans faces challenges stemming from conditions in the region and in the EU itself, which has grappled with various crises over the past decade. The accession process has been longer and arguably more demanding for Western Balkan

¹⁴ The term *Western Balkans* refers to a subset of countries in the Balkan Peninsula. Today, the grouping typically includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, all of which seek EU membership. Albania is the only country that was not part of the former Yugoslavia. Slovenia and Croatia, which were part of the former Yugoslavia, joined the EU in 2004 and 2013, respectively.

¹⁵ Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, *Unfulfilled Promise: Completing the EU Enlargement to the Balkans*, 2014.

¹⁶ Milada Anna Vachudova, "EU Enlargement and State Capture in the Western Balkans," in Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil, and Marko Kmezić (eds.), *The Europeanisation of the Western Balkans: A Failure of EU Conditionality?* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Agon Maliqi, *Transition to What? Western Balkan Democracies in a State of Illiberal Equilibrium*, Sbunker.net, November 2020.

countries than for the countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. Many European policymakers attached high strategic and symbolic importance to enlargement into CEE, whereas enlargement into the Western Balkans “has long been low down on the EU’s agenda.”¹⁷

Croatia and Slovenia are the only Western Balkan countries that have joined the EU. Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia are candidates, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are considered potential candidates. EU enlargement into the region has lagged behind that of NATO, which admitted Slovenia as a member in 2004, Albania and Croatia in 2009, Montenegro in 2017, and North Macedonia in 2020.

EU Enlargement Policy in the Western Balkans

For the past two decades, EU integration has been at the center of both European and U.S. policy toward the Western Balkans. U.S. and European policymakers generally view the EU accession process as a tool to spur economic, legal, and political reforms and help stabilize the region. In 1999, the EU launched the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) as its policy framework for the region. As part of the SAP, the EU concluded bilateral Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAA) with each Western Balkan country. These contractual agreements include measures on trade liberalization, political dialogue, financial assistance, and regional cooperation.

At a 2003 summit in Thessaloniki, Greece, the EU articulated a clearer membership perspective for Western Balkan countries, asserting that “the future of the Balkans is within the European Union.”¹⁸ The EU has sought to reaffirm this commitment to the Western Balkans on various occasions. In its 2018 enlargement strategy, for example, the EU described enlargement into the Western Balkans as “a geostrategic investment in a stable, strong, and united Europe” and introduced six flagship initiatives to tackle specific concerns in the Western Balkans, particularly the need for fundamental reforms and “good neighborly relations.”¹⁹ More recent developments in enlargement policy include the March 2020 revisions to the enlargement methodology (see “Recent Changes,” above) and assistance packages to help Western Balkan countries respond to the COVID-19 public health crisis and mitigate longer-term economic consequences.

Broadly aimed at helping aspirant countries meet the requirements of EU membership, pre-accession assistance is a major component of EU policy toward the Western Balkans. The EU is the largest source of external assistance to the region.²⁰ EU institutions have agreed to €14.2 billion (\$17.2 billion) in pre-accession assistance under the 2021-2027 budget framework (including assistance to Turkey).²¹ This package includes an Economic and Investment Plan targeting the region’s long-term economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and convergence with the EU. In addition, a new Western Balkans Guarantee facility is intended to mobilize up to €20 billion (\$24.2 billion) in investments over the next decade.²²

¹⁷ Delevic and Prelec, “Flatter and Faster.”

¹⁸ See EU-Western Balkans Summit, *Declaration*, Thessaloniki, Greece, June 21, 2003.

¹⁹ European Commission, *A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western Balkans*, February 6, 2018 (hereinafter, European Commission, *Credible Enlargement Perspective*).

²⁰ For information on country-specific and multicountry allocations under the 2014-2020 Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, see European Commission, “Overview—Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance,” at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/overview_en.

²¹ European Commission, “European Commission Welcomes Political Agreement on New €14.2 Billion Pre-Accession Assistance Instrument (IPA III),” press release, June 2, 2021.

²² European Commission, *An Economic and Investment Plan for Western Balkans*, December 15, 2020; European Commission, “Questions and Answers: Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans,” October 6, 2020.

Extensive economic ties between the Western Balkans and the EU underpin the accession process. The SAAs that the EU concluded with each Western Balkan country provide for nearly fully liberalized trade. The EU is the leading trade partner for all six countries, and these ties have deepened over time. Exports from the Western Balkans to the EU grew by over 200% between 2010 and 2020.²³ Western Balkan countries fall along transportation routes into the EU, have been integrated into some European supply chains to varying degrees, and, according to analysts, could factor into EU efforts to diversify supply chains.²⁴

Potential Challenges to Enlargement into the Region

The four Western Balkan candidate countries—Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia—are considered to have a more feasible path to EU membership than Turkey or potential candidates Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. However, there is significant uncertainty (both within and outside the region) about the accession prospects and timeframes of these four candidates. This uncertainty stems in part from dynamics within the EU itself (see “Enlargement Fatigue,” below) and from controversial delays to opening accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. Some analysts assert that perceptions of dimming EU membership prospects may undercut reform momentum in the region and contribute to a geopolitical power vacuum.

Other challenges relate to conditions in the Western Balkans. Although the past two decades have been a period of peace and partial Euro-Atlantic integration, many analysts assert that the region’s political transformation has slowed or backslid in recent years. The global democracy watchdog Freedom House rated all six Western Balkan countries *partly free* in its 2021 rankings. Most countries have seen their scores deteriorate to varying degrees in recent years, including Montenegro and Serbia, which were downgraded from *free* to *partly free* in the 2019 rankings. Freedom House and other organizations that track democracy-related developments in the region have described numerous challenges, including low government accountability, uneven reform implementation, the concentration and personalization of power, deteriorating media climates, polarization, and weakening checks on executive power, among others.²⁵

Corruption and organized crime likewise are regarded as serious issues in the Western Balkans. In 2018, the European Commission noted that the region’s countries “show clear elements of state capture, including links with organized crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration, as well as a strong entanglement of public and private interests.”²⁶ The EU’s *2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy* asserted that the fight against corruption had “slowed down and the track record in most countries is far from meeting the requirements for membership.”²⁷

Corruption and governance challenges also hold back the Western Balkan region’s economic development. Although conditions have improved over the past two decades, the region’s

²³ European Commission, *Western Balkans: Trade Picture*, April 12, 2021.

²⁴ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *The COVID-19 Crisis in the Western Balkans: Economic Impact, Policy Responses, and Short-Term Sustainable Solutions*, May 7, 2020; Oliver Reiter and Robert Stehrer, *Value Chain Integration of the Western Balkan Countries and Policy Options for the Post-COVID-19 Period*, Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies Policy Report No. 48, March 2021.

²⁵ Zselyke Csaky, *Nations in Transit 2021: The Antidemocratic Turn*, Freedom House, 2021; Sarah Repucci, *Freedom in the World 2020: A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy*, Freedom House, 2020; Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2020*; Reporters Without Borders, *2021 World Press Freedom Index*. See also Florian Bieber, *The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (Palgrave Macmillan: 2020).

²⁶ European Commission, *Credible Enlargement Perspective*.

²⁷ European Commission, *2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy*, October 6, 2020.

economies perform below the EU average. Average gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, for example, is about half that of CEE EU member states and about one-quarter that of the most prosperous member states.²⁸

Some Western Balkan countries are party to bilateral disputes, the most challenging of which is between Kosovo and Serbia (see below). Other sources of regional tension have concerned border demarcation, ownership of Yugoslav-era assets, state and national identity symbols, minority rights, and transitional justice.²⁹ The EU's 2018 enlargement strategy asserts that the bloc will not admit new members that are party to unresolved disputes.³⁰

Montenegro and Serbia: Regional Frontrunners

Montenegro and Serbia are farthest along among candidate countries in the formal accession process, although neither country is expected to join the EU in the near term. In 2018, the European Commission stated that Montenegro and Serbia “could potentially be ready for membership” by 2025, while also cautioning that this target “is extremely ambitious.”³¹ As discussed above, observers have expressed concern over democracy and the rule of law in both countries.³²

Montenegro. In terms of formal progress, Montenegro is the frontrunner for EU membership. With a population of roughly 620,000, it is also the smallest candidate country. The Montenegrin government made EU accession a strategic priority after Montenegro ended its loose state union with Serbia and became independent in 2006. Montenegro concluded its SAA agreement with the EU in 2007, applied for EU membership in 2008, and gained candidate status in 2010. The EU opened accession negotiations with Montenegro in 2012. Montenegro has opened 33 of its accession negotiations chapters and provisionally closed 3 of them.

The EU's annual reports on Montenegro note progress toward aligning with the EU in some policy areas, including in foreign, security, and defense policy; energy; and agriculture and rural development. Progress in fundamental rights and the rule of law has been uneven. The European Commission's 2020 report for Montenegro, which covers the preceding year, assesses that Montenegro made little to no progress toward meeting EU requirements on the judiciary, the rule of law, efforts to combat corruption and organized crime, and freedom of expression.³³

Montenegro's political polarization, particularly over issues relating to national identity, may have longer-term ramifications for its EU membership bid.³⁴ Its political landscape underwent a tectonic shift in 2020, when the party that had led the country for three decades went into opposition for the first time. The new parliamentary majority, which comprises a mix of “radical

²⁸ Peter Sanfey and Jakov Milatovic, *The Western Balkans in Transition: Diagnosing the Constraints on the Path to a Sustainable Market Economy*, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, February 2018.

²⁹ See Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, *Removing Obstacles to EU Accession: Bilateral Disputes in the Western Balkans*, 2019.

³⁰ European Commission, *Credible Enlargement Perspective*.

³¹ European Commission, *Credible Enlargement Perspective*.

³² For more detailed accounts, see annual Freedom House *Nations in Transit* reports for Montenegro and Serbia.

³³ European Commission, *Montenegro 2020 Report*, October 6, 2020.

³⁴ About 45% of Montenegro's population identified as Montenegrin in the 2011 census; about 29% as Serb; and the remainder as Bosnian (9%), Albanian (5%), and other minority communities. The 2006 independence referendum narrowly passed with 55.5% support (with a threshold of 55%). In June 2021, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers cautioned that “social distance between almost all [ethnic groups in Montenegro] increased, and ... divides between communities may be deepening and becoming more marked” (CM/ResCMN(2021)14).

pro-Russian/pro-Serb parties, moderate pro-Serb parties, and civic parties,” has pledged to continue on the country’s European path and combat corruption and state capture.³⁵ Some observers, however, have criticized the new government’s early performance and cautioned of a potentially “more assertive pro-Serbian, pro-Russian, anti-NATO, and anti-Western politics.”³⁶

Serbia. The United States and the EU have long viewed Serbia’s Euro-Atlantic integration as important to regional stability due to its role in the Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s under autocratic leader Slobodan Milošević.³⁷ Serbia’s decade-long estrangement from the West eased after Milošević lost power in 2000; nevertheless, Serbia-EU relations were sometimes fraught. Many in the EU initially considered Serbia to be slow to implement political and economic reforms; largely uncooperative in tracking down war crimes suspects indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY); reluctant to come to terms with the country’s role in the Yugoslav conflicts; and resistant to normalizing relations with Kosovo, which declared independence from Serbia in 2008 but is not recognized by Serbia.³⁸

Serbia’s EU membership bid gained some momentum in the late 2000s. Serbia became a candidate country in 2012. In 2013, Serbia’s SAA with the EU entered into force and the EU agreed to open accession negotiations with Serbia. Today, Serbia is the candidate country farthest along in the formal process after Montenegro, with 18 accession chapters opened and 2 provisionally closed. The EU has sometimes used the accession process to attempt to boost perceived pro-European political forces and to pressure the Serbian government to cooperate on transitional justice and regional disputes. Some EU decisions to advance Serbia along key accession stages were announced ahead of critical elections or followed key developments in Serbia’s cooperation with ICTY and its participation in an EU-led dialogue aimed at normalizing Serbia’s relations with Kosovo.³⁹

At the same time, several factors complicate Serbia’s membership bid. A final, comprehensive settlement between Kosovo and Serbia remains elusive, and uncertainty over EU enlargement prospects may complicate efforts to broker such an agreement.⁴⁰ Serbia’s *balancing* (or *multi-vector*) approach to foreign relations has sometimes been a source of friction. In comparison to other candidate countries, Serbia has a lower rate of alignment with EU foreign and security policies.⁴¹ Alongside its ties to the EU, Serbia has a close relationship with Russia and arguably

³⁵ U.S. State Department, *2021 Investment Climate Statement: Montenegro*.

³⁶ Quoted in Majda Ruge and Sinisa Vukovic, *What Montenegro’s Future Government Means for the Western Balkans*, European Council on Foreign Relations, September 15, 2020. See also Orlando Crowscott, “Montenegro Wants to Join the EU—But Will Brussels Have It?” *EuroNews*, February 1, 2021. In May 2021, the chair of the European Parliament’s EU-Montenegro Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee cautioned that “some actions by the new governing majority are raising important questions about [Montenegro’s strategic orientation]” (MEP Vladimir Bilcik, Tweet, May 18, 2021).

³⁷ The U.S. State Department’s *Integrated Country Strategy for Serbia* (August 2018), for instance, asserts that “EU membership is the best guarantee that Serbia will become a stable, inclusive democracy and reliable partner.”

³⁸ “Divided EU Seeks to Boost Pro-European Parties in Serbia,” *DeutscheWelle*, April 28, 2008; “Belgium Vows to Block EU Shift on Serbia,” Reuters, February 28, 2007.

³⁹ Ibid. See also Adam Tanner and Justyna Pawlak, “Analysis: Obscure Fugitive’s Arrest Gives Serbia EU Boost,” Reuters, July 20, 2011; Elitsa Vucheva, “EU Seeks Ways to Boost Serbia’s Pro-European Course,” *EUObserver*, January 28, 2008; “Serbian EU Accession Negotiations: Nothing Unexpected in Chapter 35,” *European Western Balkans*, December 28, 2015.

⁴⁰ International Crisis Group, *Relaunching the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue*, January 25, 2021.

⁴¹ Igor Novakovic, *Seven Years of Serbia’s Alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU*, International and Security Affairs Centre (Serbia), December 2020.

has become China's closest partner in the region.⁴² In comparison to other Western Balkan countries, support for EU membership is more tepid in Serbia.⁴³ As noted above, international democracy and anti-corruption watchdogs also have raised concerns about the state of democracy and the rule of law in Serbia.

The EU's 2020 progress report for Serbia was largely positive on Serbia's economic situation, its overall progress toward a functioning market economy, and its alignment with the EU *acquis* in some economic areas. At the same time, the report noted such challenges as "deep political polarization," "long-standing electoral shortcomings," "the absence of a viable opposition" in parliament (most opposition parties boycotted the 2020 parliamentary elections), and limited to no progress in implementing EU recommendations on judicial reform and fighting corruption and organized crime.⁴⁴ The report also criticized Serbian authorities for giving "public space to convicted war criminals, and [permitting] hate speech" and urged the country to "show a genuine commitment for investigating and adjudicating war crimes cases."

Albania and North Macedonia: Awaiting Accession Talks

Albania and North Macedonia are candidates for EU membership but have not yet begun accession talks with the EU. Officials in both countries expressed dismay when, on multiple occasions in 2018 and 2019, EU member states did not approve the start of accession talks despite the European Commission's support and amid further setbacks since 2020.

With the adoption of the revised enlargement methodology in March 2020 (see "Recent Changes," above), EU member states approved opening negotiations with Albania (contingent on the country meeting several conditions) and North Macedonia (without preconditions). As the next step, member states need to adopt negotiating frameworks for both countries before accession negotiations may begin. EU member states initially were expected to adopt the required negotiating frameworks by the end of 2020, but the process has been delayed further for both countries, most recently in June 2021. Many EU and member state officials, as well as the European Parliament, have called for these negotiations to move forward, cautioning that continued delays and obstacles damage the EU's credibility and may undercut reform momentum in both countries.⁴⁵

Albania. Albania's population holds highly favorable attitudes toward the EU, with 87% viewing membership as positive in the most recent Western Balkan public opinion poll conducted by the EU-supported Regional Cooperation Council (the regional average is 59%).⁴⁶ Albania applied for EU membership in 2009, shortly after its SAA with the EU entered into force. The EU granted

⁴² Sandra Maksimovic, "VukSANovic: By Criticizing the EU and Promoting China, Belgrade Continues Its Balancing Policy," *European Western Balkans*, January 28, 2021.

⁴³ The Regional Cooperation Council tracks views of EU membership through its annual *BalkanBarometer* public opinion survey. In the 2021 survey, respondents in Albania had the most positive views of EU membership (87% viewed EU membership as a "good thing," and 10% regarded it as "neither good nor bad"), whereas respondents in Serbia had the most tepid views (26% viewed EU membership as a "good thing" and 44% as "neither good nor bad"). Other public opinion surveys suggest higher, if varying, levels of support for membership. See also Maja Zivanovic, "Anti-EU Rhetoric Risks Swaying Serbian Public, Experts Say," *BalkanInsight*, September 26, 2018.

⁴⁴ European Commission, *Serbia 2020 Report*, October 6, 2020.

⁴⁵ "Von der Leyen: Albania's Future Is Europe, Negotiations Should Start," *European Western Balkans*, March 4, 2021; European Parliament, "Enlargement Reports: MEPs Fully Support Western Balkans' European Future," press release, March 25, 2021; Foreign Ministers of Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, Joint Letter to HRVP Borrell on Western Balkans, March 5, 2021.

⁴⁶ Regional Cooperation Council, op. cit.

Albania candidate status in 2014 after it assessed that the country had made sufficient progress on judicial reforms and efforts to combat corruption and organized crime. The European Commission recommended opening talks with Albania on several occasions, but some member states objected due to concern over corruption, the rule of law, and organized crime.

Although EU member states approved opening accession talks with Albania in March 2020, they also laid out criteria for the country to meet before the first talks. These conditions related to judicial and electoral reforms, organized crime and corruption, and “unfounded asylum seekers” from Albania. In late 2020, the European Commission asserted that Albania had made “decisive progress” and was close to fulfilling these conditions.⁴⁷ In December 2020, however, EU member states did not approve the negotiating framework for Albania due in part to lingering doubts among some EU countries about Albania’s progress. Although all member states in June 2021 appeared ready to adopt the negotiating framework and allow accession talks with Albania to begin, Bulgaria’s block over North Macedonia (see below) prevented Albania from moving forward, as the two countries’ membership bids have been paired.⁴⁸

North Macedonia. North Macedonia was the regional frontrunner for EU membership in the early 2000s, in part because it largely avoided the violence that devastated other parts of the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. It concluded its SAA with the EU in 2001, applied for membership in 2004, and became a candidate in 2005. Since 2009, the European Commission has routinely recommended opening accession negotiations.

Nevertheless, the political aspects of EU decisionmaking on enlargement have long stymied North Macedonia’s membership bid. In particular, for years Greece blocked the launch of accession talks with North Macedonia due to the two countries’ long-standing bilateral dispute over use of the name *Macedonia*. The impasse in this bilateral dispute effectively froze North Macedonia’s EU membership campaign for more than a decade.⁴⁹ In addition, neighboring Bulgaria (which joined the EU in 2007) disputes aspects of Macedonian national symbols and historical narratives and at times has sought to use the EU accession process as a forum to address these concerns (see below). As North Macedonia’s EU membership prospects stalled in the 2010s, the country experienced backsliding in the rule of law and democracy, culminating in an acute political crisis between 2015 and 2017 that drew in EU and U.S. diplomatic mediation.

North Macedonia’s EU membership bid has gained some momentum since 2017 but continues to face hurdles. As part of its program to revive North Macedonia’s Euro-Atlantic integration, the government that took office in 2017 concluded a Friendship Treaty with Bulgaria the same year and reached the Prespa Agreement with Greece in 2018. Under the Prespa Agreement, which entered into force in 2019, Greece pledged to lift its veto over North Macedonia’s EU and NATO membership bids and North Macedonia agreed to change its constitutional name, among other provisions. North Macedonia’s government made politically costly concessions in the Prespa

⁴⁷ European Commission, “Commission Welcomes the Green Light to Opening of Accession Talks with Albania and North Macedonia,” press release, March 25, 2020. For additional background on these conditions, see “Albania’s EU Negotiations Bid: ‘Hope for Good News in December,’” *European Western Balkans*, November 27, 2020.

⁴⁸ “Von der Leyen: Albania’s Future Is Europe, Negotiations Should Start,” *European Western Balkans*, March 4, 2021; “EU Again Without Decision on Starting Accession Talks with Albania and North Macedonia,” *European Western Balkans*, June 23, 2021.

⁴⁹ Greece objected to the country’s adoption of *Republic of Macedonia* as its constitutional name upon independence from Yugoslavia, asserting that the name implied territorial claims to the Greek region bearing the same name.

Agreement with the expectation that the EU would swiftly reward the country by opening accession talks.⁵⁰

As discussed above, in March 2020, EU leaders approved the launch of accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia. Nevertheless, in late 2020, North Macedonia's membership bid experienced another setback when Bulgaria rejected the draft negotiating framework's reference to the "Macedonian language" (Bulgaria regards Macedonian as a dialect of the Bulgarian language), among other objections.⁵¹ Although history and identity issues have long been a source of friction, Bulgaria generally has championed enlargement and previously supported opening talks with North Macedonia. Bulgarian officials expressed dissatisfaction with the limited progress in resolving bilateral issues with North Macedonia through the mechanisms established by the 2017 Friendship Treaty.⁵²

Following Bulgaria's December 2020 veto, the two countries renewed bilateral talks, with few results thus far. Despite urging from EU and member state officials to approve the negotiating framework and allow substantive accession talks with North Macedonia to begin, Bulgaria again wielded its veto in June 2021. Bulgaria's continuing political turmoil may impede efforts to resolve the impasse; Bulgarian parties failed to form a government after April 2021 parliamentary elections and appear to be facing similar challenges following snap elections held on July 11, 2021, raising the specter of another snap poll.⁵³

Although North Macedonia is behind Montenegro and Serbia in the formal accession process, some analysts consider it to be substantively better prepared for EU membership in some areas.⁵⁴ It is also one of the few countries in the region where international democracy watchdog organizations have tracked slight progress in recent years instead of stasis or backsliding.⁵⁵ In its 2020 progress report for North Macedonia, the European Commission asserted that North Macedonia made good progress in implementing its judicial reform strategy and in "consolidating its track record on investigating, prosecuting, and trying high level corruption cases" but little progress in improving the media environment.⁵⁶

Turkey⁵⁷

Turkey has a long-standing bid for EU membership, but relations between Turkey and the European project have experienced numerous ups and downs. For decades, the EU has generally supported a close association with Turkey, especially given its geostrategic location at the crossroads of Europe and the Middle East. Some in the EU traditionally favored Turkey's accession to the bloc as a way to cement the country's European identity and Western political

⁵⁰ North Macedonia acceded to NATO in 2020. For more information, see CRS Report R45739, *North Macedonia: In Brief*, by Sarah E. Garding.

⁵¹ Bulgaria requested that the language be changed to "the language according to the Constitution of North Macedonia."

⁵² Veselin Toskov, "Bulgaria is Latest Block in North Macedonia's Bid to Join EU," Associated Press, November 21, 2020.

⁵³ Georgi Gotev, "Facing Pressure, Bulgaria Tries to Explain its North Macedonia Veto," *EurActiv*, May 12, 2021.

⁵⁴ European Stability Initiative, *How Are They Doing in 2019? European Commission Assessments of Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Albania (May 2019)*.

⁵⁵ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2020 and Nations in Transit 2020*.

⁵⁶ European Commission, *Key Findings of the 2020 Report on North Macedonia*, October 6, 2020.

⁵⁷ Also see CRS Report R41368, *Turkey: Background and U.S. Relations*, by Jim Zanotti and Clayton Thomas.

orientation. Other EU countries have been more hesitant, given concerns about the country's political system; human rights record; economy; and large, predominantly Muslim population.

Membership Aspirations and Past Progress

Turkey's aspirations to join the European integration project date back to the late 1950s. Turkey and the European Economic Community concluded an association agreement (known as the Ankara Agreement) in 1963 aimed at developing closer economic ties. The Ankara Agreement was supplemented by an Additional Protocol, signed in 1970, preparing the way for a customs union. Turkey applied for membership in the European Community in 1987, but the EC assessed that Turkey needed to make further progress in its political and economic development.

In 1995, the customs union between the EU and Turkey entered into force, allowing most goods to cross the border in both directions without customs restrictions. In 1997, the EU declared Turkey eligible to become a member of the union. In 1999, the EU recognized Turkey as an official candidate but noted that Turkey needed to comply with the political and economic criteria for membership before accession talks could begin.

In October 2005, the EU decided Turkey had made sufficient progress on reforms to allow accession talks to be launched. The EU asserted that the "shared objective of the negotiations is accession" but that it would be an "open-ended process, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed beforehand."⁵⁸ In other words, Turkey's eventual EU membership was not ensured.

Detailed negotiations between the EU and Turkey on the *acquis* began in 2006 but were soon complicated by issues related to Cyprus, which has been politically divided since 1974, largely along ethnic lines. The internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus claims jurisdiction over the entire island, but its effective administrative control is limited to the southern two-thirds, where Greek Cypriots form a majority. Turkish Cypriots administer the northern third of the island and are backed by Turkey (the only country to recognize the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" proclaimed by Turkish Cypriot leaders in 1983). Turkey's commercial and transport restrictions on Cyprus (i.e., the Greek Cypriot-majority part of the island) became a sticking point in EU-Turkey relations following Cyprus's 2004 EU accession.⁵⁹ In December 2006, the EU decided it would not open accession negotiations with Turkey on eight chapters of the *acquis* until Turkey ended its restrictions on Cyprus.

Although the EU opened talks with Turkey on 14 chapters of the *acquis* between 2006 and 2013, progress was slow and halting. In 2015-2016, as the EU faced a significant migration and refugee crisis, the EU pledged to "re-energize" accession negotiations with Turkey as part of a wide-ranging deal to gain Turkey's cooperation in stemming the migrant and refugee flows across the Eastern Mediterranean Sea to Greece.⁶⁰ Two additional chapters of the *acquis* were opened by June 2016, but efforts to reinvigorate Turkey's accession process stalled following a failed July 2016 coup in Turkey and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's subsequent crackdown on alleged coup supporters in the military and other state institutions.

⁵⁸ European Council, *Agreed EU Negotiating Framework for Turkey*, October 3, 2005, at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/turkey/st20002_05_tr_framedoc_en.pdf.

⁵⁹ Although the EU would have preferred a political solution to the conflict on Cyprus ahead of the country's accession in 2004, the EU had long asserted that this was not a precondition for Cyprus's accession. In the absence of a settlement, EU laws and financial benefits apply only to the southern Greek Cypriot part of the island.

⁶⁰ European Council, *EU-Turkey Statement*, March 18, 2016, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>.

Stalled Negotiations and Current Status

The EU viewed the measures Turkey undertook in response to the 2016 coup attempt as disproportionately repressive, especially the widespread detentions, including of journalists and civil society activists. The EU has repeatedly expressed concerns about what it considers to be declining respect for the rule of law in Turkey and a deteriorating human and fundamental rights situation, including with regard to freedom of expression. President Erdogan's initiative to consolidate power through changes to Turkey's constitution and system of government (approved in an April 2017 public referendum) further exacerbated EU-Turkey frictions.⁶¹

In June 2018, EU member states (acting in the Council of the EU) essentially froze accession negotiations with Turkey. In doing so, the EU asserted that "Turkey has been moving further away from the European Union" on democratic norms and that "Turkey's accession negotiations have therefore effectively come to a standstill and no further chapters can be considered for opening or closing."⁶² The EU also halted work on modernizing its customs union with Turkey. EU pre-accession financial assistance to Turkey has been progressively reduced since 2017, in part due to concerns about democratic backsliding.⁶³

Although Turkey remains a candidate country, Turkey's EU membership prospects appear increasingly distant. Many in the EU question whether Turkey can meet the political criteria for membership and express concerns about the implications of certain government policies on the functioning of Turkey's market economy.⁶⁴ Long-standing EU concerns persist about Turkey's treatment of Kurds and other minorities, as well as its respect for women's rights (an issue highlighted by the Turkish government's March 2021 decision to withdraw from a Council of Europe treaty on preventing and combating violence against women).⁶⁵

In recent years, aspects of Turkey's disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean with EU members Greece and Cyprus over maritime and other borders, as well as Turkish energy exploration, also have challenged EU-Turkey relations. In November 2019, the EU approved a framework to impose targeted sanctions (travel bans and asset freezes) on individuals or entities involved in unauthorized hydrocarbon drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Two Turkish individuals have been sanctioned to date. EU-Turkey differences on other regional issues, including the conflicts in Syria and Libya, and concerns about Turkey's commitment to

⁶¹ EU concerns about Turkey's political situation and democratic backsliding—especially since the 2016 failed coup—are expressed in numerous European Commission annual reports (available at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/turkey_en) and European Parliament resolutions (available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/d-tr/documents/ep-resolutions>).

⁶² Council of the European Union, *Enlargement and Stabilization and Association Process – Council Conclusions*, June 26, 2018, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>.

⁶³ Initial pre-accession funding planned for the 2014-2020 period was almost €4.5 billion. In response to Turkey's low absorption capacity, concerns about backsliding on the rule of law and other reforms, and Turkey's activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, the EU announced substantial funding cuts for 2018-2020. These cuts reduced the amount allocated for the entire 2014-2020 period to just over €3.5 billion. The pre-accession funding is separate from the €6 billion in EU support to Turkey for refugees and host communities agreed to in the context of the 2016 EU-Turkey migration deal. European Commission, *Revised Indicative Strategy Paper for Turkey (2014-2020)*, August 10, 2018; European Commission and the High Representative for the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *State of Play of EU-Turkey Political, Economic and Trade Relations*, March 22, 2021, p. 7.

⁶⁴ Marc Pierini, "Options for the EU-Turkey Relationship," CarnegieEurope.eu, May 3, 2019 (hereinafter, Pierini, "Options"); European Commission, "Key Findings of the 2020 Report on Turkey," press release, October 6, 2020.

⁶⁵ Jonathan Spicer, "U.S., Europe Press Turkey to Rethink Ditching Violence-on-Women Pact," Reuters, March 21, 2021.

controlling migration into the EU have further strained Turkey's ties with the bloc, deepened mistrust, and cast additional doubt on Turkey's accession prospects.⁶⁶

Notwithstanding the difficulties in EU-Turkey relations and the EU's significant concerns about democratic backsliding in Turkey, most European policymakers and analysts acknowledge that the EU accession process has been a major factor in Turkey's political and economic development over the last several decades. Some observers suggest the EU accession process helped produce a vibrant civil society in Turkey that has proved resilient in the face of government efforts to curtail fundamental rights and freedoms.⁶⁷ EU-Turkey agreements on trade and the customs union allow for the free movement of goods, and EU-Turkey economic ties have grown and intensified over the years. In 2020, total EU-Turkey trade in goods was nearly €132.5 billion (about \$160 billion) and Turkey was the EU's sixth-largest export and import partner for goods. The EU is also the biggest source of foreign direct investment in Turkey (with a stock of €58.5 billion, or roughly \$71 billion, in 2018).⁶⁸

Some voices in the EU, including in the European Parliament, have called for reconsidering or ending Turkey's EU membership perspective. Most recently, in May 2021, the European Parliament passed a nonbinding resolution calling on the European Commission to formally suspend accession negotiations with Turkey if the country does not reverse the negative trends in its domestic and foreign policies.⁶⁹ Others in the EU contend the enlargement door should be kept open to preserve the EU's influence in Turkey, as the accession process gives the EU leverage to push for political and economic reforms. Many experts assert that it is in the EU's strategic and economic interests to restore and maintain a strong partnership with Turkey, especially given close EU-Turkish trade and investment ties and the EU's need to cooperate with Turkey on issues such as migration, counterterrorism, and regional stability, among others.⁷⁰

At present, while the EU does not appear inclined to end Turkey's accession process, Brussels has been reassessing its relationship with Turkey. In December 2020, EU leaders reaffirmed “the EU's strategic interest” in a “cooperative and mutually beneficial relationship with Turkey” and a “positive EU-Turkey agenda,” provided Turkey engages in dialogue and compromise on disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁷¹ In January 2021, President Erdogan asserted a desire to “turn a new page” in Turkey-EU relations and the Turkish government began taking some steps to de-

⁶⁶ Jacopo Barigazzi, “EU Leaders to Line Up New Sanctions on Turkey at Summit,” *Politico Europe*, December 9, 2020; Michael Peel and Laura Pitel, “Erdogan's Great Game: The Turkish Problem on the EU's Doorstep,” *Financial Times*, January 13, 2021 (hereinafter, Peel and Pitel, “Erdogan's Great Game”).

⁶⁷ See, for example, Emiliano Alessandri, Ian Lesser, and Kadri Tastan, *EU-Turkey Relations: Steering in Stormy Seas*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, July 2018 (hereinafter, Alessandri, Lesser, and Tastan, *EU-Turkey Relations*).

⁶⁸ European Commission and the High Representative for the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *State of Play of EU-Turkey Political, Economic and Trade Relations*, March 22, 2021, p. 11; Eurostat, “Turkey-EU: International Trade in Goods Statistics,” April 7, 2021, at https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Turkey-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics#EU_and_Turkey_in_world_trade_in_goods.

⁶⁹ *European Parliament Resolution of 19 May 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on Turkey*, P9_TA(2021)0243, at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0243_EN.pdf. The resolution was adopted with 480 votes in favor, 64 against, and 150 abstentions.

⁷⁰ Alessandri, Lesser, and Tastan, *EU-Turkey Relations*; Pierini, “Options”; Peel and Pitel, “Erdogan's Great Game”; Asli Aydintasbas, “Low Expectations: A Year of Renewal for the EU-Turkey Relationship,” European Council on Foreign Relations, January 27, 2021; Luigi Scazzieri, *From Partners to Rivals? The Future of EU-Turkey Relations*, Centre for European Reform, June 23, 2021.

⁷¹ General Secretariat of the Council, “European Council Meeting (10 and 11 December 2020)—Conclusions,” December 2020, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/47296/1011-12-20-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>.

escalate tensions, including by reengaging in bilateral talks with Greece and with the United Nations-led negotiations on the future of Cyprus.⁷² In a March 2021 report, the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy and the European Commission welcomed Turkey's efforts to reduce tensions and presented both possible incentives to revitalize relations and options for expanding sanctions, should Turkey "not move forward constructively."⁷³

In a March 25, 2021, statement, EU leaders asserted the EU's readiness to relaunch cooperation with Turkey in several areas—including on modernizing the customs union and migration—albeit in a "phased, proportionate, and reversible manner."⁷⁴ The statement did not address Turkey's EU accession process, however, and prospects for resuming negotiations appear unlikely for the foreseeable future. A diplomatic protocol incident during an April 2021 visit to Turkey by European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen—dubbed "sofagate" because it centered on seating arrangements and the lack of a chair for von der Leyen—renewed EU discussion on Turkey's treatment of women and highlighted that Turkey-EU relations remain fragile.⁷⁵

At their June 2021 summit meeting, EU leaders reiterated their commitment to pursue cooperation with Turkey conditioned on progress in resolving disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean and continued dialogue with Greece and Cyprus.⁷⁶ However, tensions between the EU and Turkey persist on these issues and could escalate again, as seen by the reemergence of frictions in July 2021 following President Erdogan's statements calling for a two-state solution for Cyprus and other actions in support of the Turkish Cypriots. The EU views Turkey's support for a two-state solution as entrenching the division of Cyprus and weakening prospects for a comprehensive settlement and reunification of the island based on U.N. negotiations.⁷⁷

Longer-Term Hurdles

Even if Turkey recommitted to meeting the EU's political and economic criteria for membership and accession negotiations resumed and progressed, Turkey ultimately might not be accepted as an EU member state. Some EU governments likely would remain wary about the implications of Turkey's accession on the bloc's institutions and finances, given Turkey's size (with over 80 million people, Turkey would surpass Germany as the largest EU country in terms of population) and relatively less affluent economic position. Many EU leaders and publics also worry that Turkey's predominantly Muslim population would fundamentally alter the character, policies, and identity of the EU. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that Turkey would be able to join the EU unless and until there is a political settlement on the divided island of Cyprus.

⁷² Simon van Dorpe, "Erdogan: Turkey Wants to 'Turn New Page' in EU Relations," *Politico Europe*, January 10, 2021; Jacopo Barigazzi, "EU and Turkey Call for Concrete Actions to Improve Relations," *Politico Europe*, January 21, 2021.

⁷³ European Commission and the High Representative for the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, *State of Play of EU-Turkey Political, Economic and Trade Relations*, March 22, 2021, pp. 13-15.

⁷⁴ European Council, "Statement of the Members of the European Council," March 25, 2021, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48976/250321-vtc-euco-statement-en.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Ayla Jean Yackley and Michael Peel, "EU-Turkey in Blame Game over 'Sofagate' After Ursula von der Leyen Left Standing," *Financial Times*, April 8, 2021; Alexandra Brzozowski, "Protocol Scandal Symbolises the State of EU-Turkey Relations, EU Lawmaker Says," *EurActiv*, April 9, 2021; Matthew Karnitshnig, "Europe Deserves Erdogan's Sofa," *Politico Europe*, April 12, 2021.

⁷⁶ General Secretariat of the Council, "European Council Meeting (24 and 25 June 2021)—Conclusions," June 2021, at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/50763/2425-06-21-euco-conclusions-en.pdf>.

⁷⁷ Reuters, "EU Calls Turkish Plans for Cyprus Unacceptable," July 20, 2021.

Observers also note that EU accession may have lost its appeal for some Turkish citizens amid years of limited progress in accession talks and ongoing EU-Turkey tensions. Some in Turkey appear increasingly skeptical about the EU's intentions toward Turkey. In a 2021 survey, although 56% of Turkish respondents believed EU membership would be good for Turkey, 52% did not think the EU would ever accept Turkey as a member.⁷⁸

Prospects for Future Rounds of EU Enlargement

As noted, the EU asserts that the enlargement door remains open to any European country that is able to meet and implement the political and economic criteria for membership; this includes the remaining Western Balkan states of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, as well as countries in the wider European neighborhood farther east, such as Ukraine and Georgia. At the same time, EU enlargement may be nearing its geographic end and support for further expansion appears lukewarm at best among many EU leaders and publics. Such enlargement fatigue is driven by several factors, including EU preoccupations with other challenges.

Potential Candidates in the Western Balkans

The EU recognizes Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as potential candidates for membership. Most analysts believe it would likely be many years before either country is prepared to join the EU. The countries could encounter the same obstacles in the accession process that current candidate countries have faced. Nevertheless, the EU asserts that the possibility of membership could help accelerate reforms and promote stability in both countries.

Bosnia and Herzegovina⁷⁹

Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereinafter, *Bosnia*) concluded an SAA with the EU in 2008, which entered into force in 2015. In recognizing Bosnia as a potential candidate for EU membership, the EU hoped the prospect of EU accession would help bridge divisions in Bosnia's postwar politics and society, facilitate key reforms, and engender sustainable peace and stability in the country and the wider region.

Bosnia submitted its application for EU membership in 2016. In May 2019, the European Commission laid out 14 key priorities for Bosnia to address in its prospective EU membership path. This "reform roadmap" includes recommendations relating to democracy and functionality, the rule of law, fundamental rights, and public administration reform.⁸⁰ The EU noted partial progress on some of these priorities in its 2020 assessment of Bosnia but judged that the country "is overall at an early stage regarding its level of preparedness to take on the obligations of EU membership and needs to significantly step up the process to align with the EU *acquis*."⁸¹

Some aspects of Bosnia's political system, a product of the Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the 1992-1995 war, may complicate Bosnia's EU membership bid. Its fragmented executive and built-in veto points, among other features, have been sources of gridlock. The EU has urged

⁷⁸ *Turkish Perceptions of the European Union*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, April 29, 2021.

⁷⁹ For additional background, see CRS Report R45691, *Bosnia and Herzegovina: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Sarah E. Garding.

⁸⁰ European Commission, *Commission Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina's Application for Membership of the European Union*, May 29, 2019. Member states endorsed this opinion (and its 14 priorities) in December 2019.

⁸¹ European Commission, *Bosnia and Herzegovina 2020 Report*, June 2020.

Bosnia to implement domestic and international court rulings on some aspects of the country's election legislation and constitution. The EU's 2020 progress report called on Bosnia to fully meet its obligations under the SAA and asserted that the country more broadly "needs to bring in line its constitutional framework with European standards and ensure the functionality of its institutions to be able to take over EU obligations.... Bosnia and Herzegovina will need to reform its institutions to be able to effectively participate in EU decisionmaking and to fully implement and enforce the *acquis*."⁸²

The EU has led two missions in Bosnia aimed at improving the security environment. From 2003 until its closure in 2012, the European Union Police Mission (EUPM) sought to establish a modern, multiethnic police force that adhered to international best practices. In 2004, the European Union Force (EUFOR) ALTHEA mission was launched in Bosnia to succeed NATO-led peacekeeping missions; in 2021, the mission has about 600 troops in the country.⁸³

Kosovo⁸⁴

Kosovo declared independence from Serbia in 2008. Although 5 of the EU's 27 member states do not presently recognize Kosovo as an independent country, the EU regards Kosovo as a potential candidate and has played a considerable role in Kosovo's development since the 1999 war.⁸⁵ In addition to being the largest source of assistance to Kosovo, the EU operates a rule of law mission in Kosovo (the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo, or EULEX), its largest such civilian mission.⁸⁶ As noted above, since 2011, the EU has facilitated a dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia aimed at normalizing relations. Kosovo signed its SAA with the EU in 2014, which entered into force in 2016. The European Reform Agenda, a high-level dialogue between the European Commission and Kosovo's government, has set out priorities to guide EU-related reforms. The European Commission's 2020 progress report for Kosovo describes limited progress in some key areas, due in part to several years of political volatility in the country.⁸⁷

Kosovo's more immediate goal in its relationship with the EU is to obtain for its citizens visa-free entry into the EU's Schengen area of free movement, which allows individuals to travel without passport checks between most European countries. Kosovo is the only Western Balkan country that does not have this status, despite EU officials' assessment that the country fulfilled key requirements in 2018.⁸⁸ Some observers contend that the EU's continued denial of visa liberalization to Kosovo has undercut the bloc's credibility in the country. In its 2020 progress report for Kosovo, the European Commission reiterated that it "continues to stand behind" its assessment that Kosovo has met all benchmarks for visa liberalization and urged the EU member states to approve visa liberalization for Kosovo.⁸⁹

⁸² European Commission, *Bosnia and Herzegovina 2020 Report*, June 2020.

⁸³ European Union External Action Service, *Common Security and Defence Policy: EUFOR Operation Althea*, January 2021.

⁸⁴ For additional background, see CRS Report R46175, *Kosovo: Background and U.S. Policy*, by Sarah E. Garding.

⁸⁵ The five EU member states that do not recognize Kosovo are Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain.

⁸⁶ Some aspects of the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) have been controversial. See Valerie Hopkins, "EU Courts Trouble with Kosovo Scandal," *Politico Europe*, November 17, 2017.

⁸⁷ European Commission, *Kosovo Progress Report 2020*, June 2020.

⁸⁸ Kosovo fulfilled a key requirement, the ratification of a border demarcation agreement with Montenegro in 2018. European Commission, "Visa Liberalisation: Commission Confirms Kosovo Fulfills All Required Benchmarks," press release, July 18, 2018; Die Morina, "Kosovo's EU Visa Liberalisation Hopes Dwindle in 2019," *BalkanInsight*, January 16, 2019.

⁸⁹ European Commission, *Kosovo Progress Report 2020*, June 2020.

Eastern Partnership Countries

In 2004, as enlargement pushed the EU's borders farther east and south, the EU launched the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) to develop deeper political and economic relations with countries in close proximity to an enlarged EU. In 2009, the EU established the Eastern Partnership (EaP), a complementary program to the ENP, with its six eastern neighbors (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). The EaP is designed to offer more concrete EU support to incentivize democratic and market-oriented reforms. At times, regional developments have complicated these partnerships. Since 2020, for example, EU-Belarus relations have deteriorated sharply due to Belarus' controversial August 2020 presidential election; an ongoing brutal crackdown on protesters and independent journalists; and Belarusian authorities' forced diversion of Ryanair Flight 4978 on May 23, 2021, during its flight between two EU capitals. In June 2021, Belarusian authorities announced they would suspend EaP cooperation in response to a series of EU sanctions.⁹⁰

In contrast to the Western Balkans, the EU has not formally acknowledged a membership perspective for any of the EaP countries, some of which have expressed long-term EU aspirations. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in particular harbor hopes of joining the EU one day, and each views integration with the EU as a key foreign policy goal. All three countries have concluded Association Agreements (AAs) with the EU aimed at promoting cooperation and bringing them closer to EU rules and standards; the AAs also seek to facilitate and deepen trade relations. Conclusion of an AA, however, does not represent an EU membership commitment. At a July 2021 trilateral summit, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine issued a declaration pledging to pursue EU accession-oriented reforms and calling for a clearer membership perspective from Brussels.⁹¹

Nevertheless, most observers do not expect the EU to recognize Georgia, Moldova, or Ukraine as a potential candidate in the foreseeable future. All three countries face considerable domestic political and economic challenges, including territorial conflicts, and thus have long roads to meeting the EU's membership criteria. Some EU member states also may be wary that any steps to draw these EaP countries nearer to the EU may provoke a negative Russian reaction. As discussed below, a sense of enlargement fatigue among some EU national governments and publics also suggests waning support for ambitious new rounds of EU enlargement.⁹²

Enlargement Fatigue

Despite the EU's commitment to continued EU enlargement—especially to the Western Balkans—a number of European leaders and many EU citizens remain cautious about further expansion of the bloc. Apprehensions and declining enthusiasm among some EU officials and publics are especially evident with respect to Turkey or the Eastern Partnership countries. Factors contributing to such enlargement fatigue include the following:

⁹⁰ CRS In Focus IF10814, *Belarus: An Overview*, by Cory Welt; “Belarus Recalls Envoy from Brussels in Response to EU Sanctions,” *France24*, June 28, 2021.

⁹¹ *Batumi Summit Declaration Issued by the Heads of State of Association Trio—Georgia, Republic of Moldova, and Ukraine*, July 19, 2021, at <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/deklaraciya-batumskogo-samitu-shvalena-glavami-derzhav-asoci-69609>.

⁹² For more information on the Eastern Partnership, see European Commission, “Eastern Partnership,” at https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/eastern-partnership_en. Also see CRS Report R45307, *Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy*; CRS In Focus IF10894, *Moldova: An Overview*; and CRS Report R45008, *Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy*, all by Cory Welt.

- **Rule-of-Law Concerns.** Doubts persist about the ability of some potential EU aspirants to implement EU standards, especially in areas related to the rule of law, fundamental rights, and anti-corruption measures. Recent assessments from such international nongovernmental organizations as Freedom House and Transparency International have fueled concern over democratic backsliding and ongoing corruption and state capture in some candidate countries. Furthermore, concern over weakening rule of law in several EU member states—particularly Poland and Hungary—has curbed enthusiasm for further enlargement among some EU leaders given the EU’s limited tools to sanction countries for rule-of-law infringements following their accession.
- **Labor Migration.** Some EU policymakers and European publics have long worried that the addition of countries with weak economies and lower incomes could lead to an influx of low-cost or unwanted migrant labor. Such perceived fears ahead of enlargement to CEE prompted the EU to allow the “old” member states to institute temporary restrictions (of up to seven years) on labor migration from countries that have joined the EU since 2004. Most studies since 2004 suggest that the proportion of EU citizens moving from east to west following enlargement has been relatively small and that such migrants have not displaced local workers or significantly driven down local wages. At the same time, many in the EU are mindful that the presence of migrants from other EU countries, including from countries in CEE such as Poland, was a factor in stirring up anti-EU sentiments in the UK and support for Brexit. EU concerns about labor migration thus persist, especially when considering the potential accession of large, relatively less affluent countries such as Turkey or Ukraine in the longer term.⁹³
- **Balance of Power Within the EU and Impact on Policymaking.** Key EU member states may fear that an ever-expanding union could ultimately weaken their ability to set the tone and agenda in EU institutions and to drive EU policies. Since 2004, the EU’s enlargement has brought in a more diverse group of member states, with different interests and policy preferences by virtue of their varied histories and geography. As a result, EU enlargement may have made reaching consensus or speaking with one voice on certain issues—from migration and energy policies to relations with Russia and China—more difficult and may have jeopardized EU solidarity in some instances. Expanding the number of member states could further complicate or slow EU decisionmaking and may make deeper EU political and economic integration unlikely.
- **EU Identity.** Another broad European concern with respect to ongoing enlargement is with the overall identity of Europe, what the EU stands for, and where “Europe” ends. The EU’s struggle with these issues is highlighted in the debates over the possible admission of Turkey, with an Islamic culture perceived by many Europeans to be vastly different and not compatible with European traditions and society. Anti-Muslim sentiment has helped fuel the rise of right-wing, populist, euroskeptic parties in several EU countries. Some observers and officials in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo have expressed concern that anti-Muslim bias and other stereotyping have shaped European

⁹³ “Free Movement of Labor in the EU 27,” *EurActiv*, August 9, 2011; Jonathan Wadsworth et al., *Brexit and the Impact of Immigration on the UK*, London School of Economics, Centre for Economic Performance, May 2016.

policymakers' views on enlargement to these countries and decisions on issues such as visa liberalization.⁹⁴

- **Other Challenges.** The EU is contending with an array of internal and external challenges, including managing the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting sharp economic downturn, that could slow future rounds of EU enlargement. Other issues preoccupying EU policymakers' time and attention include ongoing migration concerns; a resurgent Russia; and navigating relations with an increasingly competitive, confident China. Some of these concerns have created deep divisions among EU member states and raised questions about the future direction of the EU itself. As a result, EU leaders may be less inclined to robustly push forward the enlargement agenda. Some experts suggest that Brexit also could dampen prospects for further EU enlargement, because the UK had been one of the staunchest supporters within the EU of continued expansion, including to Turkey.

Questions about the EU's commitment to further enlargement could have potentially significant consequences for Turkey and the Western Balkan countries. A number of experts contend that the loss of a clear EU membership path could exacerbate negative trends in democracy and the rule of law.⁹⁵ In addition, analysts caution that waning EU credibility could exacerbate instability in the Western Balkans, where the accession process has been linked to regional reconciliation.⁹⁶

Decreased EU influence stemming from weakened membership perspectives could create an opening for external powers, particularly in the small countries of the Western Balkans. Russia has close ties to some governments and politicians in the region and has been accused of conducting malign influence campaigns aimed at subverting Euro-Atlantic integration, particularly NATO enlargement. Many observers also have expressed concern over China's presence and longer-term ambitions in the Western Balkans. In addition to its growing economic footprint, China has deepened its security, technological, and political cooperation with some countries in the region.⁹⁷ Several observers note that Turkey also has pursued a degree of cooperation with Russia in recent years, as Turkey's relations with both the EU and the United States have grown more difficult.⁹⁸

At the same time, the various challenges facing the EU—including the bloc's largely sluggish economic growth over the past decade—might make joining the bloc less attractive for some current and potential EU candidates. For decades, many countries aspired to join the EU largely for the economic benefits that membership would bring. Now, aspirants may not view the benefits of membership as outweighing the potential constraints on their sovereignty and national fiscal

⁹⁴ "EU-Balkan Visa Deal Slated as 'Anti-Muslim,'" *EurActiv*, July 13, 2009; Reuters, "Don't Turn Your Back on Us, Albania PM Tells EU," April 25, 2018; David M. Herszenhorn, "Diplomatic Blow-Up After Macron Calls Bosnia a 'Ticking Time-Bomb,'" *Politico Europe*, November 9, 2019; Orlando Crowcroft and Dena Ristani, "Albania Is No Closer to Joining the EU. Its Leaders Might Prefer It That Way," *EuroNews*, April 23, 2021.

⁹⁵ Zoran Nechev et al., *Bouncing Back: Completing the EU Unification Process*, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, June 2021; Natasha Wunsch, *How Covid-19 Is Deepening Democratic Backsliding and Geopolitical Competition in the Western Balkans*, London School of Economics, May 20, 2020.

⁹⁶ Cameron Munter and Valbona Zeneli, "Filling the Balkan Power Vacuum," *American Interest*, May 8, 2020.

⁹⁷ RFE/RL, "EU Woos Balkans with More Aid as Russia, China Vie for Influence," May 6, 2020; Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, *Russia's Game in the Balkans*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 6, 2019.

⁹⁸ Galip Dalay, "Turkey and Russia Are Bitter Frenemies," *ForeignPolicy.com*, May 28, 2019.

and monetary policies, or they may pursue closer economic cooperation with China as an alternative route to prosperity.⁹⁹

U.S. Perspectives and Congressional Interests

Since May 1950, when President Harry Truman first offered U.S. support for the European Coal and Steel Community, the United States has championed the European integration project.¹⁰⁰ Supporters of the EU project contend that it largely succeeded in fulfilling core U.S. post-World War II goals in Europe of promoting peace, political reconciliation, and economic prosperity and in doing so, helped to deter the Soviet Union. Successive U.S. Administrations and many Members of Congress traditionally have backed EU enlargement, believing it served U.S. interests by advancing democracy and economic development and thereby creating strong European political allies and trading partners.

Following the collapse of communism in CEE in 1989, U.S. and EU officials worked in close cooperation to promote democratic transitions and market-oriented reforms. Congress passed the Support for Eastern European Democracies (SEED) Act in 1989 (P.L. 101-179) to provide assistance for the region's transition.¹⁰¹ Leaders on both sides of the Atlantic routinely asserted that the formerly communist countries would be welcomed warmly into the EU, as well as NATO, if they met the necessary political and economic criteria.

After the wars in the Western Balkans in the 1990s, the United States and EU also viewed an EU membership perspective for Albania and the countries of the former Yugoslavia as crucial to fostering reconciliation, stability, and security in the region. As the U.S. role in the Western Balkans gradually decreased, U.S. policy focused on supporting EU efforts in the region, in particular enlargement. U.S. foreign assistance to Western Balkan countries aims to support EU integration in concrete ways, such as supporting reforms required for EU membership, and in indirect ways, such as promoting an engaged civil society and inclusive communities.

In the 1990s and 2000s, some U.S. policymakers were keen to promote EU enlargement because they viewed it as a way to decrease U.S.-EU tensions given that many of the CEE countries were often regarded as more pro-American. Many U.S. officials also hoped that with the EU's enlargement to the east and the transformation of the continent nearly complete, the EU would be able to turn its attention outward and become a more capable partner for the United States in tackling a range of global challenges. U.S. business and commercial interests generally favored EU enlargement as well, believing it would provide access to a larger, more integrated European market and help further reforms of the EU's regulatory regime and common agricultural policy, frequent sources of U.S.-EU trade conflicts.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Philippe Le Corre and Vuk Vuksanovic, "Serbia: China's Open Door to the Balkans," *The Diplomat*, January 1, 2019; "Serbia Ready to Sacrifice EU Membership over Kosovo Deal," *EurActiv*, June 19, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ See "Official Statement by Harry Truman," May 18, 1950, at https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/official_statement_by_harry_truman_18_may_1950-en-b1645976-b15d-4d58-9303-d40424987f56.html. Also see U.S. State Department, Office of the Historian, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950, Western Europe, Volume III*, at <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v03/ch2subch2>.

¹⁰¹ U.S. assistance to Central and Eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union totaled \$20 billion from 1990 to 2012, according to U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) data. See USAID, *20 Years of USAID Economic Growth Assistance in Europe and Eurasia*, July 24, 2013.

¹⁰² See, for example, Michael Baun, "The Implications of EU Enlargement for the United States," *Perspectives*, no. 21 (winter 2003/2004), pp. 27-38; Keith Crane, *EU Enlargement: Implications for U.S. Trade and International Financial Policies*, Wilson Center, June 24, 2003; E. Anthony Wayne, Assistant Secretary for Economic and Business

Over the past 25 years, one of the only significant U.S. criticisms of the EU's enlargement process has been that the bloc was moving too slowly, especially with respect to Turkey. U.S. policymakers and many Members of Congress have long supported EU membership for Turkey, viewing Turkey as a vital, strategic ally that should be anchored firmly to Europe. U.S. officials also anticipated that EU membership would help defuse tensions between Greece and Turkey (both NATO allies) over Cyprus and other issues in the Aegean Sea. Especially in the 1990s, the United States played an active, albeit small, role in Turkey's EU accession path; in 1999, for example, the Clinton Administration reportedly lobbied Ankara to accept the EU's offer to recognize Turkey as an official EU candidate, despite Ankara's unhappiness that the EU had not set out a timetable for accession talks. Periodically, however, U.S. pressure to promote Turkey's EU accession prospects generated tensions with the EU.

Although U.S. relations with Turkey have deteriorated in recent years, many analysts contend that it remains in U.S. interests to support Turkey's EU membership perspective and convergence with European democratic norms. As one assessment observes, the United States has a long-term stake in a functioning EU-Turkish relationship and "the geopolitical logic of binding Turkey to Western institutions endures."¹⁰³ At the same time, active U.S. support for Turkey's EU accession is unlikely to return to levels seen in the 1990s and 2000s in light of concerns on both sides of the Atlantic regarding rule of law in Turkey and other tensions in relations.¹⁰⁴

Further EU enlargement could have some indirect negative implications for U.S. interests. Even with EU institutional reforms, EU decisionmaking is often cumbersome and enlargement could create more divisions on certain issues—including EU policy on Russia and China—and could impede the EU from becoming a more coherent foreign policy actor and partner for the United States. At the same time, an enlarged EU, with an economic output roughly equivalent to that of the United States and growing political clout, may be better equipped to address future challenges and play a more assertive international role independent of the United States.

Although the Trump Administration was often critical of the EU, U.S. policy continued to endorse the EU aspirations of the Western Balkan countries. In October 2019, the U.S. State Department expressed disappointment with the delay in approving the opening of EU accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, in part because of the U.S. view that progress in the EU accession process would have "firmly pushed back against malign external actors, who seek to undermine Western values and the Euro-Atlantic community."¹⁰⁵ At the same time, some analysts assert that U.S.-EU policy coordination in the Western Balkans weakened under the Trump Administration, including on issues that are vital to enlargement, such as the EU-mediated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia.¹⁰⁶

The Biden Administration has expressed support for EU enlargement into the Western Balkans.¹⁰⁷ Ahead of a June 2021 EU summit where accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia's

Affairs, "European Union Enlargement in Central Europe: Challenges and Opportunities," U.S. Department of State, April 2, 2004.

¹⁰³ Alessandri, Lesser, and Tastan, *EU-Turkey Relations*, p. 10.

¹⁰⁴ Ian Lesser, "The Transatlantic Dimension," in Kadri Tastan (ed), *Defining New Modes, Models, and Agendas for EU-Turkish Relations*, German Marshall Fund of the United States, June 2021.

¹⁰⁵ U.S. State Department Spokesperson, "The European Council's Conclusions on Enlargement," press statement, October 18, 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Cameron Munter and Valbona Zeneli, "What Will a Joe Biden Presidency Mean for the Balkans?" *National Interest*, December 13, 2020.

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Commitment to the Western Balkans," press statement, April 26, 2021. President Biden's decades-long engagement with the Western Balkans region dates back to his career in the U.S. Senate, when he

were again on the agenda (see “Albania and North Macedonia: Awaiting Accession Talks,” above), the U.S. State Department urged the EU to move forward “without delay,” and indicated U.S. engagement on the issue “at the highest levels of government.”¹⁰⁸ At the June 2021 U.S.-EU summit, President Biden and EU leaders agreed to increase “joint engagement in the Western Balkans, including through the EU-facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina on normalization of their relations, and by supporting key reforms for EU integration.”¹⁰⁹ The Biden Administration’s pledge to elevate democracy, the rule of law, and human rights in U.S. foreign policy and national security also may motivate an increased focus on these issues—which are requirements for EU accession—in Western Balkan countries.¹¹⁰

Many Members of Congress retain a long-standing interest in the Western Balkans and are concerned about a variety of developments in Turkey. Congress may consider whether and to what extent continued EU enlargement serves U.S. interests in Europe. Potential issues for examination include the following:

- The effectiveness of the EU accession process in entrenching democratic values, the rule of law, and free market principles in aspirant countries and how recent EU changes to the process seek to improve the implementation of political and economic reforms;
- The degree to which the EU membership perspective for the countries of the Western Balkans has contributed to resolving ongoing disputes, preventing conflicts, and promoting reconciliation and stability in the region;
- The role of the EU accession process in helping to prevent greater Russian and Chinese influence in the Western Balkans;
- The relationship between continued EU and NATO enlargement and potential implications for future NATO-EU cooperation and coordination;
- The current state of U.S. and EU relations with Turkey and possibilities for U.S.-EU cooperation in promoting Turkey’s continued Western orientation;
- The effectiveness of U.S. foreign assistance in supporting democracy, the rule of law, and good governance in EU candidate and potential candidate countries, and whether funding levels are sufficient;
- Areas for U.S.-EU cooperation in the Western Balkans, particularly on issues connected to EU enlargement; and
- The longer-term EU aspirations of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova and ways the United States and the EU may work together to support these countries’ closer alignment with Europe.

was a prominent voice in congressional debates over the U.S. response to the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia.

¹⁰⁸ U.S. Department of State Spokesperson, Twitter, June 10, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ White House Briefing Room, “U.S.-EU Summit Statement,” June 15, 2021, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/15/u-s-eu-summit-statement/>.

¹¹⁰ White House, *Memorandum on Establishing the Fight Against Corruption as a Core United States National Security Interest*, June 3, 2021, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>. Shortly thereafter, President Biden expanded a Western Balkans sanctions program to include undermining democratic institutions and the rule of law or violating human rights as grounds for designation. See White House, “Fact Sheet: Executive Order Blocking Property and Suspending Entry into the United States of Certain Persons Contributing to the Destabilizing Situation in the Western Balkans,” June 8, 2021.

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