

## Policy Position 2024/151

# Future EU enlargement: Learning the lessons twenty years on from EU enlargement to Central and Eastern European Countries

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In light of the current geopolitical context, the EU has re-launched the enlargement process. EU membership negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova are due to start in Spring 2024. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia are not far behind. Montenegro will potentially join the EU by 2030.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the largest enlargement of central and eastern European countries in 2004, followed by subsequent additions in 2007 and 2013. Enough time and experience has been amassed to allow lessons to be drawn (as set out in more detail in industriAll Europe's policy position) which must be learnt.

The experience of the eastern enlargement 20 years ago offers valuable lessons for possible future enlargements of the European Union, especially with regard to the Western Balkans and Ukraine. As a result of our analysis of previous enlargements, industriAll Europe believes that the following elements are essential preconditions for a successful enlargement process:

1. **Mandatory involvement of trade unions and civil society:** the EU and EU Member States should actively involve and support civil society and trade unions in the accession countries with the reforms required by the enlargement process.
2. **Promoting the rule of law and human rights:** The EU must ensure that potential candidate countries adhere to high standards of rule of law, human rights, labour and trade union rights, before their accession. Strong codetermination rights are the only way to guarantee welfare, social peace and economic participation of all. This requires consistent monitoring and evaluation as well as the willingness to take appropriate measures in the event of violations.
3. **Need for a strong control and scrutiny of public, European funds or funds from EU Member States and comprehensive systems of investigation of misuses, corruption and fraud.** Moreover, all EU or national public money must be tied to social conditionality (i.e. the security of sites, respect of trade unions, engagement in social dialogue, collective bargaining and information and consultation rights).
4. **Consideration of social impacts:** The EU should consider the social impact of enlargement and ensure that the interests of workers are adequately taken into account.
5. **Adequate mechanism for sectoral collective bargaining:** Retain, stabilise and extend the sectoral collective bargaining structures, processes and institutional frameworks to ensure that they will be in line with the Minimum Wage Directive (2022/2041) on adequate minimum wages and collective bargaining.

6. Communication, dialogue and civic education: The EU should engage in an open and transparent communication process with accession countries and promote a constructive dialogue on the challenges and opportunities of EU membership. This can help to reduce misunderstandings and prejudices and strengthen confidence in the accession process. Efficient funding for education on the fundamental European principles of democracy, rule of law and civic and workers' participation must be available and secured on long terms.
7. Properties of democratic trade unions must be protected against privatisation or nationalisation.
8. Lobby for control of the influence of private capital on the governmental decision-making and no uncontrolled sell-off of industries.
9. Alignment of EU Industrial Strategy with Cohesion Objectives: Ensure that the EU's industrial strategy supports cohesion goals and respects workers' rights, fostering solidarity and regional development.
10. Investment Plan for Decarbonisation and Job Creation: Implement a comprehensive investment plan to support decarbonisation efforts and prevent regional disparities, leveraging public and private funds effectively. Workers must have a say.
11. Mitigation of the impact of austerity: Flexibility in fiscal rules is essential to avoid hindering decarbonisation efforts, while promoting climate investments and the low-carbon transition.
12. National Industrial Plans and Capacity Building: Encourage the establishment of national industrial plans and strengthen administrative capacities to ensure effective utilisation of EU funds and trade union involvement in strategic planning.
13. Enhanced Social Dialogue and Regional Job Opportunities: Promote effective social dialogue at all levels and ensure quality employment opportunities in decarbonising regions, fostering a Just Transition and preventing depopulation.

By taking these lessons into account and drawing on the experience of eastward enlargement, the EU can ensure that future enlargements are successful and sustainable and contribute to strengthening European integration, and can guarantee that the newer enlargement will not lead to poorness related migration, ensures social cohesion and workers' participation.