

The enlargement of the European Union: how does it work

Today, the European Union is a political and economic union of 27 member states. A number of countries have also applied to join the Union. Currently there are nine candidate countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Ukraine and Turkey, though accession negotiations with Ankara have been frozen since 2018. Kosovo remains a potential candidate. However, the process to finally become a member state is long and is far from straightforward.

In this podcast, we will find out more about the procedure to join the EU.

In order to apply for EU membership a country has to be European and respect the EU's democratic values. It also needs stable and democratic institutions and the rule of law. Moreover, it must have a functioning market economy and the ability to take on and carry out the obligations of EU membership.

A country can become an official candidate only once it meets basic political, economic and reform criteria. It can then start formal negotiations on 35 chapters covering many different policy areas with the EU. The chapters form the basis of the accession negotiations. They are reviewed during a screening and are evaluated regularly until each chapter can be considered closed. Once negotiations and reforms have been completed, an 'Accession Treaty' is finalised. The document then needs to be ratified by all existing EU member states and the country itself before the country can join the EU.

The nine candidate countries include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey as well as Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova since June 2022, and Georgia since December 2023. It has been a long road for these three countries to reach this point. And the Russian war against Ukraine has certainly sped it up. Kosovo remains a potential candidates.

All these countries benefit from EU funding, policy advice, as well as Association Agreements, giving far-reaching access to the EU's internal market.

The European Parliament debates and votes on annual progress reports for each country, which is an opportunity to identify areas of concern. Its approval is also required before a country can join the European Union. The Enlargement process is an investment in peace, security and stability in Europe as the European Parliament's President, Roberta Metsola, said during the high-level Conference on the Western Balkans in June 2022:

"Enlargement has always been seen as a transformative process for countries that want to look to Europe as their home".

According to the European Commission, Serbia and Montenegro could become member states already in 2025.

This broadcast is brought to you by the European Parliament. You can find out more on its website.