

De-risking the EU Accession Debate: Overcoming Ratification Challenges in EU Member States

Matija Lojpur and Jovica Jović

Executive Summary

- > The recent momentum in European Union (EU) accession negotiations by Montenegro and Albania offers a genuine possibility that an accession treaty might be ready for ratification in the next years. Yet, given the unpredictability and complexity of the current political context, ratification by all EU member states (MS) is far from certain.
- > Several factors position France, Austria and Czechia as the three MS with the highest risk of ratification failure. Eurobarometer data shows that citizens are most concerned about irregular migration, organised crime and terrorism and costs to taxpayers. Also, in France and Czechia, the public is less informed about enlargement than the EU average.
- > While the European Commission has taken positive steps to reinforce its enlargement-related communication to domestic audiences in the EU, the potential for shaping an effective and positive narrative remains underexploited.
- > Moving forward, the EU and its MS should focus on creating a positive narrative on enlargement and pre-empting the potential for negative politicisation. They can do this through more targeted messaging, increased transparency and more structured engagement with civil society.
- > Building resilience against hybrid threats and foreign interference will be key to lower the risk of ratification failure. EU institutions and MS need to foresee adequate resources, and can use techniques such as pre-bunking to 'inoculate' their societies against foreign manipulation.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, enlargement appears to be back on the European Union (EU)'s agenda and is increasingly referred to as a "geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity", including in the highest-level EU policy documents (European Council 2024). Recent momentum in some candidate countries is a cause for cautious optimism that enlargement might become a reality in the near future. After receiving a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR), Montenegro started closing *acquis* chapters in 2024, and as of June 2026 has closed 16 out of 33 chapters. After having already opened all chapters at record speed, Albania received a positive IBAR in May 2026, allowing it to start closing chapters in the near future. As of June 2026, Montenegro's objective to join the EU by 2028 was deemed of being "within reach" by Commission President von der Leyen (Associated Press 2026). In parallel, initial work on the drafting of Montenegro's accession treaty has already begun. Looking beyond the Western Balkans, on 29 August 2026 Iceland will hold a referendum on the resumption of accession negotiations with the EU, the outcome of which might add additional impetus to the enlargement process.

These developments raise the possibility of at least one accession treaty requiring ratification in the next years. However, given the current political climate, ratification remains far from certain. A failed ratification would mean that an accession treaty could not enter into force, with potentially devastating ramifications for the EU's credibility and for the enlargement process as a whole. This would ultimately put into question the European perspective of the Western Balkans but also that of other key partners such as Ukraine and Moldova. Given the geopolitical importance of anchoring these countries into the EU, as well as the Union's moral commitment towards the European aspirations of their citizens, a failed ratification is a risk that the EU and its member states (MS) cannot afford.

Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, the legal basis for EU enlargement, requires all MS to ratify the accession of new members in line with their constitutional requirements. For

most states, this means parliamentary ratification, whereas for France, the default option according to the constitution is a referendum, which can be bypassed by a constitutional supermajority in Parliament. France's example could be followed by advisory or binding referenda in other MS. This means that domestic political stakeholders (political parties, interest groups, civil society) as well as public opinion will play a key role in securing support for ratification. While public support for EU enlargement has in general increased across the EU since 2022, it varies significantly between member states. Some, such as France, Austria, Germany and Czechia display a level of support below 50% (Eurobarometer 2025). Moreover, Eurosceptic and enlargement-sceptic political forces play increasingly important roles in domestic politics in these and other MS, raising the risk of failed parliamentary ratification. A key issue lies in the fact that most surveyed EU citizens feel they are not well informed about enlargement (ibid.). Such a lack of information creates an environment in which the domestic debates on enlargement run the risk of being subsumed under issues related to domestic politics, for instance by being the target of a protest vote in the case of a referendum or scapegoating by political forces. It also provides fertile ground for foreign interference.

With this in mind, it is possible to assume that pro-enlargement stakeholders are in need of a proactive strategy that seeks to pre-empt negative politicisation and prevent exclusive ownership of national debates by anti-enlargement stakeholders. This policy brief will identify member states at the highest risk of failed ratification, assess the EU's current approach to communicating enlargement internally and explore how the EU and its MS can reduce these risks.

France, Austria and Czechia – member states currently at the highest risk for ratification failure

While in past enlargement rounds the accession of new MS was regarded as a broadly consensual issue at the time of ratification, the current context is more uncertain. For the 2004 “big bang” enlargement, relative geopolitical and economic stability, together with strong transatlantic relations, provided a very favourable context for the consolidation of the EU through treaty reforms and the integration of new members. Today's context, by contrast, is characterised by a highly politicised degree of European integration, a fragile and unpredictable transatlantic relationship and an unfavourable economic situation driven by rising costs of living and geoeconomic uncertainty. Currently, domestic debates on future accessions are largely absent, poorly informed and poorly structured (Lequesne et al. 2026).

Three primary factors will determine the likelihood of failed ratification in a given MS. The first risk factor (RF1) is strong

public opposition towards EU enlargement, based on recent Eurobarometer data, specifically towards Montenegro and Albania as the current Western Balkan frontrunners. The second factor (RF2) is a strong presence of parliamentary opposition. The third factor (RF3) concerns the likelihood of political forces that are strongly opposed to enlargement coming to power or playing a decisive role in parliamentary politics in a MS by 2030, based on national election timelines and current opinion polls. Figure 1 presents an overview of these risk factors for each MS.

Figure 1. Mapping of ratification failure risks for Montenegro and Albania by 2030

	RF 1	RF 2	RF 3
Austria	++	-	+
Belgium	+	-	-
Bulgaria	-	-	-
Croatia	-	-	-
Cyprus	+	-	-
Czechia	++	+	-
Denmark	-	-	-
Estonia	-	-	-
Finland	-	-	-
France	++	+	+
Germany	+	-	+
Greece	+	-	-
Hungary	-	-	-
Ireland	-	-	-
Italy	+	-	-
Latvia	-	-	-
Lithuania	-	-	-
Luxembourg	-	-	-
Malta	-	-	-
Netherlands	-	+	-
Poland	-	-	-
Portugal	-	-	-
Romania	-	-	+
Slovakia	+	-	-
Slovenia	-	-	-
Spain	-	-	-
Sweden	-	+	-

Source: For RF1, compilation of Eurobarometer data. For RF2 and RF3, authors' own research and analysis.

Note: For RF1, opposition to both Montenegro and Albania is indicated with a “+” if it is stronger than support for either and a “++” if it is prevalent for both. RF2 should be understood as reflecting the influence of parliamentary parties opposed to further enlargement, rather than just their share of seats. Opposition to enlargement by political forces should be understood as principled opposition, rather than a strict understanding of the need to meet merit-based accession criteria.

By focusing on these factors, it is possible to identify three MS that present the highest risk of ratification failure. Considering the referendum requirement, as well as upcoming presidential election in 2027, with the far-right Rassemblement National (RN) currently leading in the polls, and a relatively high level of public opposition towards the accession of both Montenegro (42%) and Albania (48%), France represents the highest risk for ratification failure. Austria offers another case, due to the favourable position of the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and the highest level of public opposition towards enlargement in the whole EU. Czechia presents a third case, after the latest parliamentary elections brought in a more Eurosceptic majority as well as a high level of public opposition to enlargement. Other countries, notably Germany, also show a conjunction of these factors, yet their risk is relatively lower.

Migration, costs to taxpayers, and fear of terrorism as the main drivers of opposition

In France, the only country where a ratification referendum is mandatory, public opposition to enlargement in general stands at around 48%. The most concerning aspects of a future enlargement scenario for the French public include uncontrolled migration (41% of all respondents), and the potential costs to European taxpayers as well as increased economic disparity between EU countries/regions, with each accounting for 37% (Eurobarometer 2025). It is worth mentioning that the outlined results largely reflect the general EU average. In the case of France, the outlier can be found in a public concern over unfair competition, which was brought up by 30% of the respondents in contrast to the general average of 21%. Interestingly, in the case of France, 44% of the respondents claimed that they were not very well informed about enlargement topics, with 30% suggesting that they were not informed at all (ibid.). The two figures are well above the EU-27 average.

When considering the positions of political stakeholders that will be key in determining whether parliamentary ratification is an option and whose stances might shape a referendum campaign, a great deal of uncertainty can be observed. France's main Eurosceptic force, the RN, is traditionally opposed to both further widening and deepening of the EU. The party's most recent manifesto was explicitly opposed to "enlargement of the EU to the Balkans, Turkey and Ukraine", framing these as a risk to agricultural sovereignty and purchasing power (Rassemblement National 2024). To the left of the political spectrum, La France Insoumise (LFI) is one of the more enlargement-sceptic parliamentary forces, noting its opposition to "enlargement without prior social, fiscal and environmental harmonisation" in its political programme (LFI, n.d.). The stances of these political forces reflect the concerns of public opinion to varying degrees, with an important

distinction that left-wing opposition is likely to be focused on issues of competitive pressure due to market integration and the EU's socio-economic model rather than on issues related to migration and identity (Chopin et al. 2025).

In Austria, 54% of respondents identified costs to European taxpayers as the biggest concern, with corruption, organised crime and terrorism second (49%) and negative impact on employment and wages third (48%). Besides the negative impacts on employment and wages, the erosion of European values represents a notable outlier in Austria's case, with 36 % respondents in comparison to the EU average of 21%. A lower percentage of the Austrian public considers itself insufficiently informed about enlargement topics in comparison to the EU average (59% versus 67%) (Eurobarometer 2025).

The current Austrian coalition government is broadly supportive of the enlargement process. As such, their parliamentary majority does not represent an imminent risk of ratification failure. However, the far-right FPÖ, which obtained the highest result (28.85%) in the last election, is currently leading in opinion polls, and presents a much more critical stance towards EU enlargement. While the FPÖ's opposition towards the Western Balkans is not unconditional or uniform, the level of public opposition in Austria raises the risk that concerns related to the accession of new states might be mobilised in a future campaign and might turn into electorally contentious issues. While the next elections are only scheduled for 2029, political surprises leading to coalition instability cannot be ruled out. The concerns of Austrian citizens regarding cost, organised crime, terrorism and wage competition represent fertile ground to mobilise political opposition if the timeline for a future election coincides with the ratification of an accession treaty. In comparison, in Germany, where the next elections are also scheduled for 2029, the relatively lower level of public opposition to enlargement lowers the risk for political salience.

In the case of Czechia, the public raised the most pronounced concerns regarding migration (52% of respondents), corruption, organised crime and terrorism (47%), and increasing economic and financial disparities between EU countries and regions (44%). At 75%, the Czech percentage of respondents claiming they are not well informed about enlargement topics was slightly above the EU-27 average (ibid.).

Recent elections in Czechia brought into power a right-wing, Eurosceptic coalition. While the dominant ANO party is more pragmatic when it comes to the accession of the Western Balkans, their position might be influenced by the more vocal opposition of their coalition partners, the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy and Motorists for Themselves,

especially when taking into account the level of public opposition towards enlargement. Depending on the political climate of the moment, this configuration might turn ratification into a politicised and divisive issue and influence ANO's stance.

A more ambitious and comprehensive approach is needed

The EU's approach to communicating enlargement internally is evolving. Aware of the strategic necessity, the Commission has started taking a more active approach, observable in the engagement of Commissioner Kos with stakeholders inside the EU. Such engagement is more frequent than that of her predecessor and anticipates the possibility of domestic ratification debates emerging in the near future. It comprises meetings with political, business and civil society actors within MS and engagement with national media outlets. While this is a welcome development and a step in the right direction, the Commission has yet to develop a more systematic approach toward communicating enlargement within the EU. Member states, that have all endorsed the language of 'geostrategic investment', could also play a more active role in structuring the debate in their domestic constituencies.

When it comes to engaging with civil society, the EU's approach remains predominantly outward- rather than inward-looking. During Commissioner Kos' recent 2025 "Implementation Dialogue with Civil Society on Enlargement", organised with the aim of promoting a 'whole of society approach to enlargement', the list of participating organisations mainly included civil society organisations (CSOs) based in candidate countries (DG ENEST 2025). While this is beneficial for calibrating the EU's approach and ensuring democratic ownership in candidate countries, the absence of a structured platform to ensure the input of EU CSOs is a missed opportunity. Moreover, despite their relatively high level of engagement in outward-facing policies, the potential for engaging CSOs from enlargement countries in domestic debates remains underexploited.

Over the years, the EU has steadily increased the number of publicly available documents pertaining to the process of enlargement. The Commission's "Country Reports", "Communications on EU Enlargement Policy" together with the "Council Presidency Conclusions on Enlargement" have expanded in both frequency and level of detail. Nevertheless, certain key documents remain unavailable to the wider public. The most prominent example includes the IBAR, which is publicly inaccessible and likely to appear only in summaries within Commission reports and Council positions. While having in mind the politically sensitive nature of enlargement negotiations, the lack of transparency associated with the formal negotiation process leaves ample room for Eurosceptic actors to frame the enlargement debate within the EU-27 in

ways which could be detrimental to final ratification processes.

The EU's evolving general approach to strategic communication has also taken into account the enlargement dimension. Recent attempts at securitising the EU information sphere through the EEAS Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) framework included the establishment of a Western Balkans Task Force (WBTF) engaged in practising public and cultural diplomacy together with supporting the understanding of EU policy in the region (EEAS 2025). Such initiatives have aimed at establishing strategic engagements with stakeholders through projects such as the 'Europeans in Action' initiative. This campaign attempted to, inter alia, contribute toward a "friendly and factual perception of the region in the EU" (ibid.) by promoting the work of individuals who uphold journalistic standards, fight against disinformation and are involved in human rights protection. Although the WBTF initiative represents a much-needed step in the right direction, its effects have mostly remained localised, with limited influence on the public inside the EU. Against this background, addressing the low level of EU citizens who feel well informed about enlargement (roughly 67% across the EU-27) remains a point of concern. A less informed public is more susceptible to disinformation and an ideal target audience for external actors such as Russia or China.

Policy recommendations: how to reduce the risks of failed ratification?

The EU institutions and MS should focus on creating a comprehensive and proactive approach that should seek to create a positive narrative about accession, that can mobilise public support while reducing public opposition. The discussed attention points and shortcomings lead to the following recommendations, addressed to EU institutions and MS governments, to be rolled out in the short-term (within the next year) and medium-term (next two to three years).

Short-term actions

- ***The EU institutions should create a more structured communication strategy to ensure that messaging is tailored to the concerns of public opinion***

Previous enlargement rounds, especially the 2004 'big bang', were characterised by a strong political narrative about the 'Return to Europe' of countries that had been behind the iron curtain. Similarly, today's narrative centres around the consolidation of the European continent and the securing of geostrategic interests through enlargement. Led by the European Commission, the EU institutions should develop a comprehensive communication strategy to anchor this narrative in the public debate – with a priority focus on the

countries at the highest risk of failed ratification. Such a strategy should closely involve MS, and include well-defined target audiences and corresponding channels, as well as a timeline for outreach well ahead of ratification processes.

Outreach efforts should focus on how the accession of new states can help the EU ensure both conventional and economic security, fight corruption and manage migration more efficiently, and the relatively low per capita costs of integrating the Western Balkans. Messaging can draw on key facts, figures and examples to strengthen these points. For example, a recent study by the European Policy Centre in Serbia evaluated the cost of integrating the Western Balkans as only being around 5 euros per capita for EU citizens, effectively summarised as representing “the price of a cup of coffee – in some countries perhaps accompanied by a small pastry – per year” (Subotić/Milinković 2025).

➤ ***The Commission and member states should improve the inclusion of civil society actors from the EU and candidate countries in domestic debates***

The Commission would benefit from a more formalised and systematic approach toward integrating intra-EU civil society actors in its policymaking processes. It can do this through regular public consultations and stakeholder forums during visits by officials to MS, as well as during flagship events such as the annual EU Enlargement Forum. Commission Representations in MS and regional Europe Direct offices can be useful focal points to collect the views of civil society regarding enlargement and to organise regular outreach efforts on the ground. This would require adequate budgetary and staffing allocation towards the countries at the highest risk of ratification failure.

Integrating CSOs from candidate countries in such platforms could also help assuage doubts on various areas, as they could provide more nuanced, objective and impartial points of view, while still being advocates for the European integration of their countries.

➤ ***The Commission, Council and member states should increase the transparency of the process and focus communication on successes in potentially salient areas***

MS would benefit from more focused and active communication on key milestones of the accession negotiations. These include interim benchmark assessments, closing of chapters and safeguard clauses. This could provide tangible evidence of reform progress for portions of the public concerned with a particular area. In addition, it could offer a structured official output of enlargement requirements and processes for the segments of the public who are less informed on such matters.

Without disclosing confidential documents, the EU could communicate concrete positive achievements highlighted by EU Common Positions and Commission Progress Reports. For example, in the case of Montenegro and Albania, it could be useful to highlight the improved track record in prosecution of high-level corruption cases. This would help reinforce the message that enlargement is merit-based and that acceding countries will have had to undergo a rigorous and transformative process of reforms.

Medium-term actions

➤ ***National parliaments and the European Parliament can improve the participation of political stakeholders in discussions on accession***

Given that national parliaments will be deciding on ratification in most cases, it would be important to involve them in discussions at an early stage. Structured exchanges with national parliamentarians can help identify and address concerns and even find alternative majorities that could support ratification independently of current dynamics between governments and oppositions. The European Parliament can play a key role by identifying convergences and divergences among political groups at the EU level. Discussions are taking place at the level of the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs and should continue, possibly under an expanded format to ensure that all political stakeholders are represented.

➤ ***The EEAS, Commission and member states should build resilience against hybrid threats and foreign interference***

The EU should ensure that existing policies and instruments to combat FIMI and hybrid threats are adapted and ready to be deployed ahead of and during national debates on ratification. This means that coordination mechanisms, staffing and financial resources should be appraised and adapted ahead of time.

When tackling such threats, EU-level and national authorities can use a mix of de-bunking and pre-bunking, both of which can be effective, but which will require an approach tailored to the factors of each unique national context, such as levels of trust in government and the different issues of concern in each country (European Commission 2024). When faced with a lack of public trust in some MS, relying on partners or opinion leaders might be preferable to institutional communication.

The issues of highest concern identified by public opinion surveys can be taken as a priority for pre-bunking measures. By anticipatively exposing the public to potential manipulative narratives on issues such as migration, cost to taxpayers and corruption, MS and institutions can help build societal

resilience against them before hostile actors have the chance to influence public opinion. This could be done through various channels, including campaigns and interventions on traditional media, social media and even interactive games, which have shown effectiveness in the past (Rozenbeek et al. 2020).

➤ ***Member states should ensure that the ratification debate is focused on the current frontrunners***

It would be of particular importance to pre-bunk narratives that would seek to link the accession of the current Western Balkan frontrunners to candidates whose accession would be more complex and have major implications for the EU's internal functioning – most notably Türkiye and Ukraine. In this regard, it will be key to explain to the public that Montenegro or Albania acceding would not automatically give a green light to the accession of larger countries, and that those candidates will ultimately be assessed on their own

merits and advance at a different pace. Simultaneously, the opportunity should be used to prepare the ground for a public debate on EU-internal reform, which will likely be necessary before the accession of larger countries in the longer-term.

Conclusion

The current political context presents risks related to enlargement which cannot be ignored. In order to ensure that the ratification of a future accession treaty succeeds, the EU institutions and MS need to implement proactive measures urgently. France, Austria and Czechia represent the most pressing and emblematic cases of MS, where risks are high and should be prioritised. By structuring the public debate in ways that privilege fact-driven narratives, pro-enlargement stakeholders are able to make a strong and active case for their position, significantly lowering the risk of failed ratification.

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