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Three scenarios for Kosovo

May 2024



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May 2024

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This Policy Analysis was developed with the support of the “SMART Balkans – Civil Society for Shared Society in the Western Balkans” regional project implemented by Centar za promociju civilnog društva (CPCD), Center for Research and Policy Making (CRPM) and Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) and financially supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The forthcoming elections to the European Parliament, to be held between 6th and 9th June, are set to have a deeply lasting impact on the EU's future approach towards the Western Balkans. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 triggered a geopolitical awakening of the EU's enlargement appetite, with several landmark political decisions concerning Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina being made within a relatively short time period, the Union's geostrategic compass still requires a speedy fine-tuning.

In parallel to this, the rise of the populist right in many of the EU's Member States is expected to pose sizeable additional challenges to the credibility and the functionality of enlargement, especially as **more Eurosceptic forces are headed towards substantive victories across the Union**. This is bound to reflect on the future composition—and on the very likely fragmentation—of the European Parliament, where anti-enlargement far-right parties are set to emerge as the big election winners. At the same time, progressive, liberal and left-wing forces across the Union are bound to experience a slow but steady decline in voter support. In this context, the prospects for Kosovo's EU integration, which is approached with reservations even by pro-enlargement mainstream parties, run the risk of deteriorating further.

The prospects for Kosovo's EU integration run the risk of deteriorating further in a more right-wing European Parliament.

This paper sheds light on **the potential impact of the EU elections on the EU's enlargement policy towards the**

Western Balkans, and on Kosovo's accession prospects in particular. It builds methodologically upon three different data sets: first, a collection of written sources featuring European Parliament resolutions, meeting records and votes, press releases and statements, policy documents, and news articles; second, a set of eight semi-structured interviews with EU policy experts and journalists from the EU and the Western Balkans, as well as with representatives of the European Parliament, conducted between November 2023 and April 2024; and third, a statistics-based seat projection forecast published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) in January 2024.

The findings reveal the relative **cross-party consensus** that the EU's enlargement policy has traditionally generated among the political groups represented in the European Parliament. During the ninth legislature, between 2019 and 2024, five out of the seven groups—the EPP, the S&D, Renew, the Greens, and the ECR—have held enlargement-friendly views to varying degrees. The paper finds stark exceptions particularly within the EPP, the S&D and the ECR groups, where **support for enlargement has been rather conditional on the MEPs' Member State of origin**. This proves even more so in regard to Kosovo, where MEPs from the five non-recognising Member States have tended to not follow their political group's voting line, rather basing their approach upon their own countries' domestic sensitivities. Between 2021 and 2023, on average, 46 percent of EPP-affiliated MEPs from the five non-recognisers voted against the European Parliament's Reports on Kosovo—compared to an average two percent among EPP MEPs from recognising countries. The opposition

rate was highest within the Spanish delegation, where 92 percent of its EPP-affiliated MEPs voted against the Reports.

Among the five non-recognisers, 46% of EPP-affiliated MEPs voted against the European Parliament's Reports on Kosovo, compared to 2% among the recognisers.

The Left and the ID groups, located on either extreme of the political spectrum in the European Parliament, have not endorsed the EU's enlargement to the same extent. While the Left has been critical of the current enlargement strategy but remains—not without reservations—open to its enactment eventually, the ID group has almost unanimously opposed any kind of political support for the policy. This is chiefly due to the group's radical Eurosceptic view that the EU should not exist, let alone enlarge.

Based on the seat projection forecast, at least 20 percent of the future MEPs could be opposed to Kosovo's EU accession prospects. This could be either due to their outright opposition to enlargement overall, or due to holding political reservations around Kosovo's sovereignty and independence. This can have a destabilising potential for the country's EU aspirations, as **a sizeable segment of the European Parliament would be opposed from the outset to any policy attempt at integrating Kosovo into the EU—**regardless of its accomplishments.

At least 20% of the future MEPs could be opposed to Kosovo's EU accession.

The EU elections will be followed by an arduous political bargaining process

among the 27 Member States that will ultimately see the appointment of the President of the European Commission and the rest of the College of Commissioners. As the influence of far-right parties increases across the Union, the salience of enlargement as a policy item could lose traction—not least in the light of a potentially more illiberal and right-leaning European Council that could push the topic down the priority list. It will be instrumental for the European Commission's enlargement portfolio to be under the responsibility of a politically strong Commissioner, namely a figure that gathers both the political sensitivity towards the question of enlargement and the technical rigor to reaffirm the merit-based nature of the process.

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Building upon the preliminary seat projection forecast, **three main scenarios** for Kosovo's EU accession prospects can be mapped. A **best-case scenario**, which is rather unlikely, would involve a parliamentary progressive-liberal coalition between the S&D, Renew and the Greens, which have consistently shown unequivocal support for the EU's enlargement agenda and have been critical of democratic backsliding in candidate countries. The appointment of a Standing Rapporteur for Kosovo from a political party that is sympathetic to the country's trajectory and aspirations would also constitute the best outcome.

A **status quo scenario** would draw from the experience of the 2019-2024 period and would rest on the centrist coalition of EPP, S&D and Renew, with casual help from the Greens and the ECR, under which most enlargement-related

agreements have flourished. A representative from the Greens would stay on as Standing Rapporteur for Kosovo, and the to-be Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement would come from a recognising Member State—which would very unlikely be Hungary.

Most of these conditions would be reverted in the framework of a **worst-case scenario**, where a strong-enough majority of centre-right, right and extreme right parties is able to take over a major share of the agenda-setting power. This can lead to EU enlargement as a policy item becoming increasingly tied to issues of security and immigration, and can see the key Standing Rapporteur role falling into the hands of the anti-enlargement Eurosceptic right. In this scenario, the European Commission's enlargement portfolio would fall under the responsibility of a figure nominated by one of Kosovo's five non-recognising Member States.

The new European Parliament could gather the largest number of anti-enlargement MEPs in its history, against which Kosovo's EU aspirations are likely to find themselves at risk.

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In anticipation of such a scenario, the paper recommends for:

1 The further isolation of anti-enlargement voices in the European Parliament, where a united pro-enlargement majority must be loudly heard. This should translate into the establishment of a *cordon sanitaire* against the ID, barring it from attaining key roles in the Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs or in the Delegation for relations with Kosovo. The

progressive and liberal groups should unite their negotiation efforts to prevent the role of Standing Rapporteur for Kosovo from falling under the responsibility of the EPP, the ECR or the ID, whose potentially unbiased reporting could jeopardise Kosovo's accession credibility.

2 The appointment of a politically and technically strong European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, namely a figure that could potentially also hold the role of European Commission Vice-President, to send out a message of earnest commitment to enlarging the EU. This figure should be able to balance the 'emotional' and 'technical' approaches to enlargement, through understanding first-hand both the political importance of the Western Balkans' EU accession and the necessary merit-based nature of the process. They should be nominated by a Member State that recognises Kosovo—which will immediately dispel doubts about any potential political bias that could negatively impact the country's bid.

3 Kosovo authorities to persevere in their EU integration efforts despite a geopolitically and ideologically hostile international context. There is no alternative to Kosovo's EU path, so Prishtina must accelerate and strengthen its democratic reforms to consolidate itself further as a democratically credible partner. Kosovo should also adopt a more politically flexible position vis-à-vis its international allies, which can place it at a more comfortable and influential position—particularly in the framework of the dialogue with Serbia—contributing to restore its (currently damaged) image as a cooperative and reliable party.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over 400 million eligible voters across the European Union (EU) are being called to the polls between the 6th and 9th June to cast their ballots for the European Parliament (EP), where **720 Members** (MEPs) will be elected. These polls will mark the start of the chamber's **tenth legislature**, ever since the first direct elections that took place in 1979. These will also be the first elections after Brexit, as the (once again) 27 Member States will elect their political representatives to an enlarged EP.

These elections, inaccurately but commonly known as the 'European elections', are a loyal reflection of the EU's state of affairs and pay testimony to the ebb and flow of Member States' priorities, political concerns, and ideological tendencies. It is following each EP election that the European Commission (EC), the EU's executive machine, takes office for a new five-year mandate to spearhead the Union's policy agenda. The composition of the EC's steering body, the 27-member College of Commissioners, is a portrait of the EU's political (mis)balance—in itself articulated along the axes of influence and ideology. In 2024, the EU's ideological compass is guiding the Union rightwards, namely towards one of the most right-leaning legislatures ever.

The EU's expected sharp turn to the right is a direct consequence of the relentless rise of Eurosceptic, nationalist and populist political forces and parties, which are already present in the governments of Hungary, Italy, Finland, Croatia, Czechia, and Slovakia, and which are likely to top the polls in Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Poland, among others. In parallel to this, progressive, liberal and left-wing forces across the Union are experiencing a slow but steady decline in voter support. Despite the EP not being the most powerful EU institution in the realm of decision-making and agenda-setting, two roles rather reserved for the EC and for the 27 Member States in the European Council, the ideological alignment across political parties and groups in the EP does hold sizeable effect on the EU's ability to make policy choices. **Foreign policy** in general, and the EU's **enlargement policy** in particular, are such realms.

The 2024 EP elections are likely to have a lasting impact on the EU's future approach to its enlargement strategy, not least after the Union's geopolitical reinvigoration prompted by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Western Balkans in general, as years-long candidates, and particularly Kosovo—which stands alone as the only potential candidate country—are set to bear the brunt of the ongoing ideological transformations taking place at the EU's core.

In this light, this paper has as foremost goal to draw a comprehensive picture of the EU's enlargement prospects against the backdrop of an increasingly conservative Union. It will explore what is at play for the Western Balkans, and for Kosovo in particular, after the EP elections, and it will provide a set of recommendations to confront the EU's new political reality. Following this introduction to the topic, **Section 2** provides a political background to the 2024 EP elections through an assessment of the 2019-2024 EU mandate—placing a particular emphasis on the enlargement policy and on the EU's relations with Kosovo. Against this context, **Section 3** goes on to present the ideological positioning of the (currently) seven political groups in the EP vis-à-vis the EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans, and to Kosovo in particular, and map out the prospective outcomes of the groups' coalition-building processes. **Section 4** turns its attention towards the EC and the European Council, and discusses their potential future configuration—with a focus on the identity of the future Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement. **Section 5** makes sense of the potential post-election uncertainties and maps out three scenarios for Kosovo—a best-case, a *status quo*, and a worst-case—which illustrate three divergent paths for the country's accession prospects. The paper's final conclusions and a set of policy recommendations are outlined in **Section 6**.

2. A GEOPOLITICAL ELECTION FOR A UNION IN NEED

The EP was constituted for its ninth legislature the 2nd July 2019, following direct elections in 28 Member States that called over 400 million EU eligible voters to the polls. With a turnout of slightly over 50 percent, these elections gathered the **highest percentage of voters** since 1994.¹ Five months later, the 2nd December 2019, the EC officially took office under the leadership of President Ursula von der Leyen for what, from the outset, would be considered a “geopolitical Commission”.² While aware of the extremely high geopolitical, socio-economic and strategic stakes the EU was to endure, very few could have predicted the myriad challenges that the (soon) 27 Members—as the last stages of the painstaking Brexit negotiations were shortly coming to an end—were yet to encounter.

2.1. How we got here: assessing the EU's 2019-2024 term

The EU went to the polls in 2019 in an attempt to find a joint political way out of its multiple dilemmas, enhanced by an ever-growing chain of identity-shattering episodes that it had been dragging unresolved for over a decade. The aftermath of an aggressive **financial crisis** that started globally in 2007—and which consequences are still felt today in some of the Union's economies—smoothly merged into an even more lingering **migration crisis**, which reached its peak in 2015 but has since then not left the policy discussion.³ The migration and security dimensions to EU sovereignty were increasingly instrumentalised by nativist populist movements and ultra-conservative parties, which in turn triggered a **renaissance of far-right ideologies** across the Union that helped them reach or consolidate power in Hungary, Poland, Italy and Slovakia, among other Member States, and reap substantive electoral gains in Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany and France, to name a few.⁴ Since then, older and well-established centre-right parties—traditionally referred to as the ‘mainstream right’—have gradually **bought into the extreme right's discourse** and shifted further to the right, arguably abandoning the political centre.⁵ Further to this, the victory of pro-Brexit campaigners in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump as President in the United States took a heavy toll on the EU's relationship vis-à-vis its traditional allies and stubbornly prompted the Union's own reckoning journey—namely, coming to terms with the idea that the world is more hostile than it used to be, and that certain challenges will need to be endured alone.⁶

Against this backdrop, the von der Leyen Commission took office in late 2019 with the pledge of **consolidating the EU as a geopolitical and transformative power** while observing the

¹ European Parliament. 2019. 2019 European election results. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/turnout/>

² European Commission. 2019. Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_6408

³ European Council. 2024. Migration flows: Eastern, Central and Western routes. Yearly irregular arrivals (2015-2024). Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/migration-flows-to-europe/>

⁴ Henley, J. 2023. How Europe's far right is marching steadily into the mainstream. The Guardian. 30 June. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jun/30/far-right-on-the-march-europe-growing-taste-for-control-and-order>

⁵ Chambraud, C. and S. Le Bars. 2023. European conservatives are increasingly influenced by the far right. Le Monde. 20 June. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/06/20/european-conservatives-are-increasingly-influenced-by-the-far-right_6034288_4.html

⁶ Besch, S. 2016. *EU Defence, Brexit and Trump: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Centre for European Reform. London.

values of multilateralism and pacifism.⁷ It was only shortly thereafter, in early 2020, when the eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the EC to take an abrupt detour from its cut-out programme and deliver on its geopolitical ambitions while navigating through an unforeseeable scenario. The EU's response to the pandemic—in terms of medical assistance and solidarity-based decision-making—proved to be **loaded with geopolitical intentions**, not least as a reflection of the Union's strategic competition with Russia and China. This, in most cases, tended to focus on debunking malign narratives that had as main goal to undermine the EU's reliability as an external partner.⁸

As the 27 Member States gradually transitioned out of the pandemic peak and the EU as a whole slowly started to coordinate its recovery, the EC's mandate was put to the test again the 24th February 2022. Then, **Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine** prompted one of the EU's speediest and most unified foreign policy reactions in recent times.⁹

With the far right rising unstoppable both inside and outside the EU's borders, an ongoing war of aggression at its doorstep, and increasing stakes of belligerent economic and political competition against Moscow and Beijing, the events that have marked a major part of the world's geostrategic compass between 2019 and 2024 have called the EU's geopolitical bluff. From 2024 on, and especially following the EP elections, the Union has the troublesome task of finding a stable direction to its rhetorical quest and practicing what it preaches, while learning to navigate the geopolitical trials and tribulations that an increasingly hostile international arena is set to bring along.

2.2. Enlargement awakening?

The devastating remarks of former EC President Jean-Claude Juncker, uttered at the beginning of his mandate only a decade ago—"no further enlargement will take place over the next five years"—are long forgotten.¹⁰ The von der Leyen Commission kicked off its term with an essential change of paradigm, if only rhetorically, that enlargement was back on the table as part and parcel of the EC's **renewed geopolitical commitment**.¹¹ By 2024, it is hardly surprising to witness that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has reinvigorated a highly successful foreign policy strategy that had been dormant at best for almost ten years.

From 2019 on, the EC's political and technical mandate over the EU's enlargement policy was embodied by the **Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement**, Hungarian **Olivér Várhelyi**, whose appointment only came after the EP's rejection of a previous candidate over

⁷ European Commission. 2019. *Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_6408

⁸ Glencross, A. 2022. The EU to the rescEU? Assessing the geopolitics of the EU's medical stockpile. *European View*, 21(1), pp. 48-55.

⁹ European Commission. 2022. *Press statement by President von der Leyen on Russia's aggression against Ukraine*. 24 February. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_1441

¹⁰ Juncker, J. C. 2014. *A New Start for Europe: My Agenda for Jobs, Growth, Fairness and Democratic Change. Political Guidelines for the next European Commission*. Strasbourg, p. 12.

¹¹ European Commission. 2019. *Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_6408

potential conflict of interests.¹² Várhelyi, a seasoned diplomat who had headed Hungary's Permanent Representation to the EU during Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's third mandate and who had remained within his close entourage,¹³ was nominated and later approved to lead on the EC's enlargement portfolio.¹⁴ Since taking office, however, Várhelyi faced **severe criticism** over his counterproductive approach to the merit-based cause of enlargement.¹⁵ Reports disclosed that the Commissioner and his cabinet had proactively pushed to downplay concerns about rule of law deficiencies in candidate countries, especially Serbia, by attempting to “delete or water down language in official texts about [its] democratic failings”.¹⁶ Throughout the current EC mandate, the enlargement portfolio has been called into question by several Member States.

The work of the EC's new Directorate-General for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), itself led by Commissioner Várhelyi, started off with the unveiling of a **renewed enlargement methodology**—majorly to meet the technical demands of France and to circumvent its potential veto to launching accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia.¹⁷ Through a mostly cosmetic restructuring, where the 35 negotiating chapters of the *acquis communautaire* were grouped into six thematic clusters, and upon hopes of injecting greater dynamism and predictability to the negotiations, the EC ultimately delivered a tool to redeem itself politically vis-à-vis Tirana and Skopje, as both capitals were given green light by the 27 Member States only a few weeks later.¹⁸ In exchange for unblocking the technical process, the EC additionally awarded—now also on paper—a **bigger political weight to Member States** as decisive actors of enlargement.¹⁹

The **COVID-19 pandemic** helped showcase a novel dimension to the geopolitics of enlargement. The EU had committed €70 million to contribute shots to the Western Balkans, on top of the €500 million already pledged to the vaccine global access COVAX facility. However, the vaccine rollout plan **struggled to reach the region speedily**, paving the way for Russia and China to provide the countries with faster and easier access to COVID shots.²⁰ This gradually led to the spreading of hostile narratives against the EU, especially in Serbia, which came as a big blow to the Union's credibility in the region. The EC's **Economic and Investment Plan (EIP)** for the Western

¹² Brezar, A. et al. 2019. Hungary Voices Outrage After Proposed Commissioner is Vetoed. *Balkan Insight*. 26 September. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/09/26/hungary-voices-outrage-after-proposed-commissioner-is-vetoed/>

¹³ De La Baume, M. and L. Bayer. 2019. Hungary's Commission candidate insists he won't do Viktor Orbán's bidding. *Politico*. 18 November. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-european-commission-candidate-oliver-varhelyi-insists-he-wont-do-viktor-orbans-bidding/>

¹⁴ Kovács, Z. 2019. Hungary's EU Commissioner nominee Olivér Várhelyi gets green light from EP Foreign Affairs Committee. *About Hungary*. 18 November. Available at: <https://abouthungary.hu/blog/hungarys-eu-commissioner-nominee-oliver-varhelyi-gets-green-light-from-ep-foreign-affairs-committee>

¹⁵ Interview with Dušan Janjić, President of the Executive Board of the Forum for Ethnic Relations (FER) in Belgrade. Online, 21 November 2023.

¹⁶ Wanat, Z. and L. Bayer. 2021. Olivér Várhelyi: Europe's under-fire gatekeeper. *Politico*. 5 October. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/oliver-varhelyi-eu-commissioner-enlargement-western-balkans-serbia-human-rights-democracy-rule-of-law/>

¹⁷ 2019. *Non-Paper. Reforming the European Union accession process*. November. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Enlargement-nonpaper.pdf>

¹⁸ Esteso Pérez, A. 2020. 'Renewing hope? An analysis of the new EU enlargement methodology and its implications for Kosovo'. *Group for Legal and Political Studies*, Policy Analysis 1. Prishtina.

¹⁹ Troncotă, M. B. and A. Elbasani. 2021. The New Methodology of Enlargement and its Potential Effects on Kosovo: A Difficult Balance Between Politicization and Credibility? *Kosovo Foundation for Open Society*, Policy Paper. Prishtina.

²⁰ Stamouli, N. 2021. Western Balkans goes east for coronavirus vaccines. *Politico*. 9 February. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-vaccination-coronavirus-sinopharm-china-eu/>

Balkans, launched in 2020 and worth €9 billion in EU funding, would later become one of the tools to support the region's post-COVID reconstruction.²¹ In late 2023, the EC also presented a €6 billion new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans for the period 2024-2027—met with critique from the European Court of Auditors and observers alike **due to its questionable expected impact.**^{22 23}

It is certainly **against the backdrop of Russia's attack on Ukraine** that a major share of enlargement breakthroughs have been achieved. Out of the six Western Balkan countries, three have seen their EU bids progress to varying extents: while **Albania** and **North Macedonia** launched official accession talks after several years as candidates—the latter, not without a controversial agreement with Bulgaria—**Bosnia and Herzegovina** was granted candidate status in 2022 and was given green light to launch official accession talks in 2024. The hastily approved candidacies of **Ukraine, Moldova** and **Georgia**, who submitted their applications within less than two weeks after the start of Russia's invasion, raised certain suspicion among the Western Balkan countries, who feared their own bids could be sidelined to benefit the Associated Trio given the geostrategic urge. The need to downplay these speculations, experts have argued, acted as the **main factor behind Bosnia and Herzegovina's latest accession push**, which was enacted as a purely strategic move in order to prevent the country from sliding further into havoc and to encourage reforms.²⁴ This geopolitical rationale effectively put the model of merit-based enlargement into question, making the issue hard to swallow for Member States like Germany, who is a traditional advocate for accession based on alignment and achievement.²⁵

Since the start of the legislature in 2019, the EP has arguably stood out, at least within the realm of its duties, as a **proactive and successful EU institution** vis-à-vis the Western Balkans and in the framework of the EU's enlargement agenda. Over the last five-year period, it has adopted **over 100 texts**, including resolutions and recommendations, concerning the region's accession prospects, which pays clear testimony to the **broad consensus around enlargement** that prevails in the chamber. Among other questions, the EP has spearheaded texts calling for full recognition of Kosovo by all EU Member States and for the establishment of an independent investigation into the 2023 attack on Banjska in the north of Kosovo, effectively shaping itself up as a politically dynamic and influential institution.²⁶

An **enlargement awakening**, at least narratively, is ongoing. As things stand, it appears too early to assess whether this political search for reinvigoration will spill over into the technical realm, whether candidate and potential candidate countries will fast-track on their pending reforms, and whether EU Member States will forgo domestic and bilateral concerns for the benefit of the Union's credibility. While the current enlargement momentum seems to be revolving around Ukraine as the EU's biggest potential success—but also its biggest challenge—there is an overall impression that the unexpected appearance of the Associated Trio into the

²¹ European Commission. 2020. *An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans*. Brussels.

²² European Court of Auditors. 2024. *€6 billion extra aid for the Western Balkans needs better protection*. 7 February. Available at: <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/news/NEWS-OP-2024-01>

²³ Jovanović, B. 2024. The EU's new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans: solid foundations but shaky details. *The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies*. 18 March. Available at: <https://wiiw.ac.at/the-eu-s-new-growth-plan-for-the-western-balkans-solid-foundations-but-shaky-details-n-622.html>

²⁴ Interview with Engjellushe Morina, Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). Online, 19 March 2024.

²⁵ Interview with Brussels-based correspondent on EU enlargement. Online, 13 March 2024.

²⁶ European Parliament. 2023. *European Parliament resolution of 19 October 2023 on the recent developments in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, including the situation in the northern municipalities in Kosovo (2023/2880(RSP))*.

enlargement equation is forcing decision-makers to deliver to the long-time hopefuls in the Western Balkans. Time will tell if the Union's enlargement policy is officially shifting away from its traditional merit-based approach and evolving into a purely geostrategic tool, and which bidding partners will benefit from which scenario.

2.3. A basket case: Kosovo in the EU's enlargement policy

Following a stand-by period of over five years, Kosovo waited until the last months of the ninth EP legislature to see **the end of its visa regime** for the Schengen Area. As of 2024, visa-free access into 29 European countries²⁷ (for up to 90 days in any 180-day period) is now guaranteed for all Kosovo passport holders, placing them on a par with their Western Balkan neighbours. Kosovo is, rightfully, still savouring the triumph of visa liberalisation—truth being that not many more achievements can be added to the list of positive news.

As of 2024, Kosovo remains the only country on the EU's enlargement list that holds **potential candidate status**. A major dimension to Kosovo's EU accession process is inevitably tied to Serbia, with whom bilateral relations between 2019 and 2024 have seen a serious decline. The start of the new EC mandate in December 2019 encountered a context of government transition in Kosovo, as the newly-elected executive led by Albin Kurti was soon to take office. The eruption of COVID-19, which triggered frictions among the coalition partners in Prishtina, and the government's adoption in April 2020 of a **'reciprocity doctrine' vis-à-vis Serbia**, which was met with disapproval by Western allies, helped bring Kurti's executive down only four months in.²⁸ Kurti was later re-elected by a landslide in February 2021 in the aftermath of a controversial ruling from Kosovo's Constitutional Court,²⁹ and the reciprocity approach was restored. The first effects of Prishtina's measures towards Belgrade saw mutual ID recognition as a major breakthrough in mid-2022; however, only a few months later, the **mass withdrawal of Kosovo Serbs** from the institutions in the north of Kosovo triggered an increase of tensions between the two countries that lingers until today.³⁰

After several rounds of bilateral negotiations under the auspices of the EU, early 2023 brought along two milestone moments—namely **two meetings in Brussels and Ohrid** which helped crystallise the political roadmap that Kosovo and Serbia are to follow towards the normalisation of their relations.³¹ The implementation of the documents is arguably still up in the air, as Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić denied having signed the Ohrid text, rendering the real prospects for its enactment—or its overall value—rather questionable.³² Local elections were held

²⁷ Following the entrance of Romania and Bulgaria as (partial) members as of 31 March 2024.

²⁸ 2020. Kurti: Po zbatojmë reciprocitet gradual ndaj Serbisë. *RFE/RL*. 3 April. Available at: <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/30528913.html>

²⁹ Bami, Xh. 2020. Kosovo Faces New Elections After Court Rules Govt Illegitimate. *Balkan Insight*. 22 December. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/12/22/kosovo-faces-new-elections-after-court-rules-govt-illegitimate/>

³⁰ Grulović, F. and F. Bytyci. 2022. North Kosovo Serbs quit state jobs in licence plate protest. *Reuters*. 5 November. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/north-kosovo-serbs-quit-state-jobs-licence-plate-protest-2022-11-05/>

³¹ European Union External Action Service. 2023. *Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue: Press remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell after the Ohrid Meeting with President Vučić and Prime Minister Kurti*. Available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-press-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-after-ohrid-meeting_en

³² 2023. Vučić: Nekakav dogovor smo postigli, nisam ništa potpisao, nije dan D. *Tanjug*. 19 March. Available at: <https://www.tanjug.rs/srbija/politika/19895/vucic-nekakav-dogovor-smo-postigli-nisam-nista-potpisao-nije-dan-d/vest>

in April 2023 in the four municipalities in the north of Kosovo, where **a low 3.5 percent turnout**—as a result of the Serbs’ boycott—disputed the legitimacy of the four Albanian mayors that took office in May. **Riots in the northern municipalities** of Zvečan, Leposavić and Zubin Potok ensued as a result of the mayors’ appointments, prompting the EU to implement “temporary and reversible measures” against Kosovo given its poor efforts to de-escalate the situation.³³ Tensions peaked the 24th September following **the attack on the village of Banjska**, on which the EP called for the EU “to support the investigation by the Kosovan authorities” and for the EC and the European Council “to take measures against the Serbian Government”, including freezing of funds, if Belgrade’s ties with the attack were proved.³⁴ The EC, for its part, **refrained from explicitly considering potential measures** against Belgrade.³⁵

Between 2019 and 2024, Kosovo’s painstaking journey of rapprochement to the EU has featured mixed episodes. On the one hand, the geostrategic decisions prompted by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have brought about a certain reinvigoration of the enlargement policy from which Kosovo has also benefitted through visa liberalisation, in addition to the financial and technical assistance deployed through the 2020 EIP and the 2023 new Growth Plan. In tangible terms, however, experts point out that **nothing significant has happened on the integration front**, as Kosovo is factually at the same position as it was in April 2016, when its Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU entered into force.³⁶

3. KOSOVO ACROSS THE EP: COMPARING EUROPEAN PARTY VIEWS

Seven political groups have sat in the EP during its ninth legislature: the European People’s Party (EPP), the Progressive Alliance of Socialist and Democrats (S&D), Renew Europe (Renew), the Greens–European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA), the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), Identity and Democracy (ID), and The Left (GUE/NGL), plus the non-affiliated MEPs. Political groups bring together MEPs from different Member States according to their political affinities, and tend to hold similar views across the agenda spectrum.

The way in which the political groups decide to align after the EP elections has a significant impact on the EC’s and Council’s work in the foreign policy realm, which faces constant input and leverage from the EP. The 2024 elections are opening the door to an uncertain political context where traditional mainstream parties and progressive forces are set to undergo substantive losses, mostly **to the benefit of conservative and radical right groups**. The new configuration of the EP is therefore volatile and can bring about unexplored scenarios for the EU’s enlargement policy in general, and for Kosovo in particular. This section presents an overview of each political group’s standing ahead of the 2024 EP elections, its positioning within the EU’s enlargement policy as an agenda item, and its prospects vis-à-vis the Western Balkans—and Kosovo in particular—following voting day.

³³ Bami, Xh. 2023. EU Announces Measures Against Kosovo Over Unrest in North. *Balkan Insight*. 14 June. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/14/eu-announces-measures-against-kosovo-over-unrest-in-north/>

³⁴ European Parliament. 2023. *European Parliament resolution of 19 October 2023 on the recent developments in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, including the situation in the northern municipalities in Kosovo (2023/2880(RSP))*.

³⁵ Taylor, A. 2024. Pristina, EU at odds over Banjska ‘terrorist attack’ report. *Euractiv*. 15 January. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/pristina-eu-at-odds-over-banjska-terrorist-attack-report/>

³⁶ Interview with Demush Shasha, Executive Director at the European Policy Institute of Kosovo (EPIK). Online, 1 March 2024.

3.1. European People's Party (EPP)

The EPP has been the **largest group** in the EP since 1999, currently holding 177 seats that include MEPs from all 27 Member States—its largest delegations coming from Germany (30), Poland (16), Romania (14) and Spain (13).³⁷ The group encompasses national parties of generally pro-European conservative, liberal-conservative and Christian-democratic orientation. According to early 2024 polls, the EPP could continue its trend of seat loss, as has been the case in the last two EP elections, evidencing the overall decline in backing for mainstream parties. In spite of this, the group is still set to remain the largest in the EP, holding on to a large share of the agenda-setting power.³⁸

The EPP, alongside the S&D and Renew, make up what is informally known as the **traditional 'centrist coalition'**. As the largest mainstream party, the EPP tends to ally with its S&D and Renew counterparts to pass policy documents and decisions—including on foreign policy matters and enlargement.³⁹ Throughout the ninth EP legislature, the EPP has been supportive of enlargement as a necessary geopolitical strategy and has defended that the Union should reform itself as it enlarges. The group has generally portrayed itself in favour of integrating the Western Balkans economically and culturally into the EU in preparation for full-fledged membership.⁴⁰ It has also showcased strong support for the region's EU integration **in the framework of the Union's ongoing migration discussions**, where the Western Balkan countries emerge as key players within the EPP's ambition of addressing "the common challenge of irregular migration".⁴¹ The group has been supportive of Kosovo's and Serbia's attempts for rapprochement and welcomed the 2023 texts in Brussels and Ohrid, but acknowledged that **further steps are needed** for tangible change to arrive. Some EPP voices have criticised Serbia's lukewarm standing vis-à-vis Russia's invasion of Ukraine, interpreting it as a risk to regional stability and good neighbourly relations—while conveying the impression that there is **no unified position towards Serbia within the group**.⁴² In the aftermath of the attack on Banjska, Slovak EPP MEP and current EP Standing Rapporteur for Serbia, Vladimír Bilčík, was critical against Kosovo's government for slowing down the dialogue with Serbia and called for compromise to reach an agreement.⁴³ Moreover, **the group was divided** on the question of issuing an explicit condemnation of the Belgrade government, allegedly due to the opposition of several members.⁴⁴

³⁷ EPP Group in the European Parliament. *MEPs*. Available at: <https://www.eppgroup.eu/who-we-are/our-members>

³⁸ Cunningham, K. et al. 2024. A sharp right turn: A forecast for the 2024 European Parliament elections. *European Council on Foreign Relations*. Available at: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/a-sharp-right-turn-a-forecast-for-the-2024-european-parliament-elections/>

³⁹ Interview with Erisa Zykaj, Brussels-based correspondent on EU affairs. Online, 15 March 2024.

⁴⁰ EPP Group in the European Parliament. 2023. *Integrate Western Balkans before their EU accession*. Available at: <https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/integrate-western-balkans-before-their-eu-accession>

⁴¹ EPP. 2022. *EPP Position Paper on Western Balkans EPP WG4 paper approved by the EPP Presidency & Political Assembly*. 30 May. Rotterdam.

⁴² EPP Group in the European Parliament. 2023. *Serbia-Kosovo agreement: welcome, but more work is needed*. Available at: <https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/serbia-kosovo-agreement-welcome-but-more-work-is-needed>

⁴³ European Parliament. 2023. *Verbatim report of proceedings – Recent developments in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, including the situation in the northern municipalities in Kosovo (debate)*. 3 October. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2023-10-03-ITM-017_EN.html

⁴⁴ Radišić, N. 2023. N1 learns: Largest political groups in EP to demand punitive measures against Serbia. *N1*. 16 October. Available at: <https://n1info.rs/english/news/n1-learns-largest-political-groups-in-ep-to-demand-punitive-measures-against-serbia/>

In terms of the future prospects regarding enlargement within the EPP’s agenda-setting priorities, the number of EPP-affiliated MEPs yielded by each Member State will be key to understanding the group’s direction. While the general feeling could point towards the EPP’s ambition for a grand centrist coalition with the S&D and Renew following the elections, doubts remain that some EPP MEPs would not rather **prefer a coalition with the groups to its right**.⁴⁵ This could render the issue of enlargement less attractive overall, as a more right-leaning EP could shift the policy focus towards other topics adjacent to enlargement, such as migration.

The EPP is not a monolithic block, as its member parties behave not only according to their ideological affinities—but show **major divergences across Member States based on domestic agendas** and national sensitivities. This is set to become especially salient in the case of Kosovo, which usually lacks support among the EPP MEPs that come from non-recognising Member States: Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain.⁴⁶ Table 1 breaks down the voting patterns of EPP-affiliated MEPs on the yearly EP Reports on Kosovo (approved during the ninth legislature as of April 2024), by percentage. The numbers evidence that there is a **substantive divergence in voting behaviour** among EPP MEPs that come from recognising Member States versus those coming from the five non-recognisers. The party line is strongest in Spain, whose MEPs **consistently voted against the Reports** whenever they were present during the vote; whereas the two Cypriot EPP MEPs also voted against the text in 2022 and 2023. The pattern was less strict in Greece, whose EPP MEPs never voted against the Reports, and in Romania. Among the recognisers, **the unanimity in favour of the Reports was broken** by the French EPP-affiliated party Les Républicains (LR), whose 8 MEPs voted against in 2021 and abstained in 2022 and 2023.

Table 1. Voting behaviour on yearly EP Reports on Kosovo among EPP MEPs (%)⁴⁷

(+ in favour; - against; 0 abstention; / no-show)

Text adopted	Recognisers				Non-recognisers																			
					CY				GR				RO				SK				ES			
	+	-	0	/	+	-	0	/	+	-	0	/	+	-	0	/	+	-	0	/	+	-	0	/
2022 Report on Kosovo	87		6	7			100		14		43	43	50	8	21	21	25	75				92		8
2021 Report on Kosovo	83		6	11			100		14		86		36	36	21	7	50	25	25			85		15
2019-2020 Reports on Kosovo	86	6	4	4	50	50		100					29	21	43	7	75		25			100		

⁴⁵ Michalopoulos, S. 2024. EPP eyes socialists, liberals for pro-EU coalition as Breton questions von der Leyen. *Euractiv*. 8 March. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/epp-eyes-socialists-liberals-for-pro-eu-coalition/>

⁴⁶ European Parliament. 2023. *Report on the 2022 Commission Report on Kosovo*. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2023-0174_EN.html

⁴⁷ European Parliament. 2024. *Plenary sitting – Texts adopted*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/texts-adopted.html>

Following the June election, the EPP is expected to increase its support in Greece and Spain—prospectively bringing their total number of MEPs to 35 from the 20 they currently gather. This, added to the potential Cypriot, Romanian and Slovak EPP MEPs, could bring the overall number of EPP MEPs from non-recognising Member States to 48, compared with the current 40.⁴⁸ Polls predict that Spain will boast the largest EPP delegation in the EP at 26 MEPs, on par with Germany, which will imply larger political leverage within the group. In France, LR—which is sceptical not only vis-à-vis Kosovo’s EU accession, but also vis-à-vis any kind of ‘European expansion’, from the EU itself to the Schengen Area—is expected to maintain its support.⁴⁹

3.2. Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)

The S&D has stood as the **second largest group** in the EP, encompassing centre-left national parties of a pro-European progressive and social-democratic orientation. It holds 139 seats and gathers members from all Member States except Ireland.⁵⁰ Spain, Germany and Italy account for the largest delegations, at 21, 16, and 15 MEPs, respectively. As the EPP, the S&D is set to lose seats in the EP—yet another indication of the overall decline in support for mainstream parties.

Throughout the EP’s ninth legislature, the S&D has been **supportive of enlargement** as a strategic investment in the EU’s stability and security. The group headed a call in 2022 for the reinvigoration of the enlargement policy for the Union’s own relevance and credibility, advocating for a strictly merit-based and more intuitive process for candidate and potential candidate countries.⁵¹ In what concerns Kosovo’s EU accession process, the S&D has supported Prishtina in the light of its official membership application and has encouraged the EC to prepare an Opinion on the matter “without delay”. It has also called for further efforts from Kosovo authorities to enhance the independence of the judiciary and to protect media freedom.⁵² S&D MEPs, such as Croatian Tonino Picula and Dutch Thijs Reuten, have been generally vocal about **enacting measures against Serbia** following the attack on Banjska and have called for action to drop the diplomatic appeasement towards Belgrade.⁵³

Following the EP elections, the S&D group’s capacity to promote an enlargement-friendly agenda will be framed within its electoral losses, which are set to make its overall political leverage falter—especially vis-à-vis the EPP, its oldest and largest competitor. As far as Kosovo is concerned, the S&D is expected to continue its progressive reconciliation-supportive and Serbia-critical approach. In contrast to the EPP, the positioning of S&D-affiliated parties from non-recognising Member States around the Kosovo question should be **less of a concern for Prishtina**, as these parties tend to hold softer stances on issues concerning territorial politics and bilateral disputes—which tend to emerge more starkly among conservative and right-wing forces.

⁴⁸ Cunningham, K. et al. 2024.

⁴⁹ Maad, A. 2019. Les accusations de LR sur la volonté de Macron d’élargir l’UE et Schengen sont-elles fondées ? *Le Monde*. 23 May. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2019/05/23/les-accusations-de-lr-sur-la-volonte-de-macron-d-elargir-l-ue-et-schengen-sont-elles-fondees_5466163_4355770.html

⁵⁰ Socialists and Democrats, 2024. *Our members*. Available at: <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/who-we-are/our-members/meps>

⁵¹ European Parliament. 2022. *European Parliament recommendation of 23 November 2022 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy concerning the new EU strategy for enlargement (2022/2064(INI))*.

⁵² S&D. 2023. *More concrete action and mutual trust needed to ensure progress of Serbia and Kosovo on their path to the EU, urge S&Ds*. Available at: <https://www.socialistsanddemocrats.eu/newsroom/more-concrete-action-and-mutual-trust-needed-ensure-progress-serbia-and-kosovo-their-path>

⁵³ European Parliament. 2023. *Verbatim report of proceedings – Recent developments in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, including the situation in the northern municipalities in Kosovo (debate)*. 3 October.

As suggested by Table 2, which breaks down the voting patterns of S&D-affiliated MEPs on the yearly EP Reports on Kosovo (approved during the ninth legislature as of April 2024) by percentage, **S&D MEPs from the five non-recognisers have tended to cluster around the abstention** rather than opting for outright negative votes. This is mostly the case in Spain, Cyprus and Romania—while the position of Greece’s only S&D MEP changed favourably for Kosovo in 2023.⁵⁴ Only among the Slovak S&D has the position toughened, as its only MEP abstained in 2021 and voted negatively in 2022 and 2023.⁵⁵ Among the MEPs from recognising countries, support for the Reports has been consistently unanimous.

Table 2. Voting behaviour on yearly EP Reports on Kosovo among S&D MEPs (%)⁵⁶

(+ in favour; - against; 0 abstention; / no-show)

Text adopted	Recognisers				Non-recognisers																				
					CY				GR				RO				SK				ES				
	+	-	0	/	+	-	0	/	+	-	0	/	+	-	0	/	+	-	0	/	+	-	0	/	
2022 Report on Kosovo	94			6			100		100					67	33			100				10		76	14
2021 Report on Kosovo	94			6			100				100			67	33			50		50	14			86	
2019-2020 Reports on Kosovo	99			1			100				100			89	11					100		5		86	9

While the S&D’s group enlargement ambition is unlikely to lose steam, the centre-left must be ready to cope with the loss of some seats following the June elections. The largest shock is likely to be felt by the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE), which could go down from 21 to 19 MEPs—but which could be counterweighed by slight increases in Greece, Slovakia and Romania. Spain is still set to boast the largest S&D delegation in the EP, increasing its chances of maintaining the group leadership role and holding a good share of influence within the group, well in spite of the PSOE’s domestic losses.⁵⁷ Spain’s likely prominence within the S&D group should not necessarily be interpreted negatively vis-à-vis Kosovo, as the PSOE’s voting trends in the EP show a considerably more moderate—and even constructive—approach than what is usually conveyed by the country’s PSOE-led government.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Greece’s only S&D MEP was replaced in May 2023.

⁵⁵ In 2023, Slovakia went from having two S&D MEPs, Róbert Hajšel and Miroslav Číž, to one, due to the latter’s death.

⁵⁶ European Parliament. 2024. *Plenary sitting – Texts adopted*.

⁵⁷ Griera, M. et al. 2024. Socialists’ fading influence puts Sánchez and Scholz to the test. *Euractiv*. 1 March. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/socialists-fading-influence-put-sanchez-and-scholz-to-the-test/>

⁵⁸ Esteso Pérez, A. 2023. Under Spain’s EU Presidency, the Issue of the Western Balkans Will Be Sidelined. *Balkan Insight*. 12 July. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/12/under-spains-eu-presidency-the-issue-of-the-western-balkans-will-be-sidelined/>

3.3. Renew Europe (Renew)

The Renew group held 102 seats by the end of the legislature, rendering it the **third largest group** in the EP. It encompasses pro-European liberal parties that represent the centre of the political spectrum. The group gathered representatives from 24 Member States, its largest delegations coming from France at 23 MEPs, later followed by Spain, at 9, and Germany, Romania and the Netherlands, at 7 MEPs each.⁵⁹ According to early 2024 polls, Renew is set to lose a significant number of seats, possibly dropping to 86.

Mirroring its ‘centrist coalition’ partners, EPP and S&D, the Renew group holds **very positive views** towards the enlargement of the EU to the Western Balkans, having advocated for the six countries’ gradual integration into the Union’s policies and schemes.⁶⁰ The group has defended a ‘**reform to enlarge**’ approach, calling for EU treaty change and for a “deep overhaul” of common policies to enable the Union’s functional enlargement in the near future.⁶¹ There is extensive support within the Renew group for Kosovo’s EU integration, not least given the country’s strong track record of reforms and its increasing democratic improvements.⁶² Bulgarian Renew MEP and EP Standing Rapporteur for North Macedonia, Ilhan Kyuchuk, who stands among the most proactive group representatives regarding the EU’s enlargement policy, showed concern about the rhetoric and actions of Serbia—who he considers is trying to jeopardise peace and security in the Western Balkans following the attack on Banjska.⁶³

As is the case with the EPP and S&D groups, Renew’s ability to pursue its enlargement-supportive agenda will be **hindered by its expected electoral losses**, which will deprive the group from some of its leverage in the EP. Renew is set to suffer major setbacks in France and Spain and make most gains in Italy and Czechia, which should not change the group’s general approach to enlargement or to Kosovo in particular—not even among MEPs from non-recognising Member States, who have tended to abstain in votes involving Kosovo.

3.4. Greens–European Free Alliance (Greens/EFA)

The Greens/EFA have held 72 seats in the EP, making it the **fourth largest group**, with members from 18 Member States—Germany and France providing the largest amount, by far, at 25 and 12 MEPs, respectively.⁶⁴ According to early 2024 polls, the group is likely to face substantive losses overall and drop a third of its seats, foreshadowing a low turnout from disenfranchised left-wing

⁵⁹ Renew Europe, 2024. *Our MEPs*. Available at: <https://www.reneweuropegroup.eu/who-we-are>

⁶⁰ Renew Europe. 2020. *Renew Europe Group supports a European perspective for the Western Balkans*. Available at: <https://www.reneweuropegroup.eu/news/2020-02-05/renew-europe-group-supports-a-european-perspective-for-the-western-balkans>

⁶¹ Renew Europe. 2024. *EU’s institutional setup must be revised and made fit for purpose through treaty change in preparation for future enlargement*. Available at: <https://www.reneweuropegroup.eu/news/2024-01-23/eus-institutional-setup-must-be-revised-and-made-fit-for-purpose-through-treaty-change-in-preparation-for-future-enlargement>

⁶² Renew Europe. 2021. *EU enlargement: Renew Europe encourages Serbia to put reforms back on track and welcomes Kosovo’s EU commitment*. Available at: <https://www.reneweuropegroup.eu/news/2021-03-25/eu-enlargement-renew-europe-encourages-serbia-to-put-reforms-back-on-track-and-welcomes-kosovos-eu-commitment>

⁶³ European Parliament. 2023. *Verbatim report of proceedings – Recent developments in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, including the situation in the northern municipalities in Kosovo (debate)*. 3 October.

⁶⁴ The Greens/EFA in the European Parliament. *Our MEPs*. Available at: <https://www.greens-efa.eu/en/who-we-are/our-meps>

voters and pointing towards a decline in the electoral support for green and climate-oriented policies.⁶⁵

In the enlargement realm, the Greens/EFA have consistently held a view favourable of EU accession for the Western Balkans, well enshrined in the group's party programmes and manifestos.⁶⁶ Pro-enlargement texts adopted by the EP—for which the Greens/EFA, as part of progressive coalitions in the chamber, have provided staunch backing—have regularly been supportive of the region's steady integration, and particularly Kosovo's. **Viola von Cramon-Taubadel**, a German MEP from the Greens/EFA group and **EP Standing Rapporteur for Kosovo**, became one of the most vocal Green MEPs regarding Kosovo's European integration and international standing vis-à-vis Serbia. Following the attack on Banjska, von Cramon-Taubadel openly **pointed out Belgrade's ties to plot leader Milan Radojičić** and urged Serbia to withdraw all deployed troops from its border with Kosovo.⁶⁷ The Greens/EFA group has regularly defended the merit-based nature of EU enlargement as primary guarantee for democratic strengthening,⁶⁸ and has been particularly critical towards Serbia in its call both for measures against the country's ruling elite and for an independent investigation around the fraud allegations that enveloped the country's December 2023 elections.⁶⁹ The preservation of security in Bosnia and Herzegovina has also been a heated topic during the legislature, with Dutch MEP Tineke Strik leading the Greens' position on the matter and calling for sanctions against President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik.⁷⁰

The expected electoral losses for progressive forces, in parallel to the prospective gains for the ECR and ID groups, is **raising concerns among Green representatives** that the upcoming EP term will be a litmus test for the EU's enlargement policy, as there is a risk that anti-enlargement forces—which are not limited to the far-right, but also includes several strands within the EPP—might hinder the achievement of parliamentary majorities supportive of enlargement. A sample of this is embodied in the mistrust towards the EPP, who parts of the Green group believe **could cooperate with certain far-right parties** to move policies forward. In this sense, and as far as Kosovo is concerned, there is substantive fear within the group that the country might be lacking a sturdy majority within the new EP—which might render the passing of Kosovo-friendly documents more challenging overall.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Wax, E. and L. Guillot. 2024. Europe's Greens are on the ropes. *Politico*. 1 February. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-greens-are-on-the-ropes-eu-elections/>

⁶⁶ European Greens. 2019. *Adopted EGP Manifesto 2019*. Available at: https://www.datocms-assets.com/87481/1698236369-2019_manifesto.pdf

⁶⁷ European Parliament, 2023. *Verbatim report of proceedings – Recent developments in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, including the situation in the northern municipalities in Kosovo (debate)*. 3 October.

⁶⁸ The Greens/EFA in the European Parliament. 2023. *EU Enlargement: Greens/EFA welcome progress but call for commitment to reforms*. Available at: <https://www.greens-efa.eu/en/article/press/eu-enlargement-greens-efa-welcome-progress-but-call-for-commitment-to-reforms>

⁶⁹ European Greens. 2023. *Deep concerns on the Serbian election*. Available at: <https://europeangreens.eu/news/deep-concerns-on-the-serbian-election/>

⁷⁰ 2021. Evropski parlament: Dodik je problem, spreman državu gurnuti u rat. *Al Jazeera*. 24 November. Available at: <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2021/11/24/evropski-parlament-dodika-oznacio-kao-problem-i-pozvao-na-sankcije>

⁷¹ Interview with Đorđe Bojović, Western Balkans Advisor in the Office of MEP Viola von Cramon-Taubadel. Online, 12 March 2024.

3.5. European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)

The ECR is one of the two groups that have consolidated themselves to the right of the EPP, and for which support has grown exponentially over the past terms. The group held 68 seats by the end of the ninth legislature, making it the **fifth largest**, with members from 17 Member States—with Poland, at 27, and Italy, at 10, providing the largest amount.⁷² Polls estimate that the ECR could reap high enough results to **become the third largest group** in the EP, right after the EPP and the S&D. The integration of issues of the conservative nationalist right, such as migration and the opposition to the European Green Deal, into the mainstream discourse has helped shift the electoral scale rightwards, effectively strengthening the political and ideological domination that such parties can hold over the policy discussion.⁷³ ECR-affiliated parties currently hold office in Italy, Finland and Czechia, and enjoy strong voter popularity in Sweden, Poland and Romania, among other Member States.⁷⁴

The ECR's view on enlargement is **generally unified** in spite of the group's diverse composition, and this has reflected well on its trajectory throughout the EP's ninth legislature. The ECR gathers a mosaic of national conservative and extreme-right populist parties like Italy's Fratelli d'Italia (FdI), Poland's Law and Justice (PiS), Spain's Vox and Czechia's Civic Democratic Party (ODS), which majorly advocate for a 'Europe of nations' and hold relatively **joint views over the role of NATO** and the need for strengthening transatlantic relations in the face of Russia's threat.⁷⁵ In this regard, the ECR's views on enlargement towards the Western Balkans majorly pinpoint the vulnerability of the region towards Russian influence, migration flows and terrorism, and are supportive of policies to curtail these primary threats—alongside the development of the region's economic and rule of law agendas.⁷⁶

Angel Dzhambazki, a Bulgarian MEP and Chair of the ECR Western Balkans Working Group, was one of the most proactive members within the ECR group in the field of EU enlargement. He profiled himself as a staunch defender of the Western Balkan countries' EU membership—under the condition that accession does not occur “at all costs” without a due implementation of reforms, and where “bilateral issues are settled before accession”.⁷⁷ This comes as a notably sensitive call for Kosovo, for which Dzhambazki has traditionally expressed particular support; he believes that **Russia's invasion of Ukraine could embolden Serbia** to use military force in Kosovo, and that Serbia's current foreign policy is “detrimental to the security in the Western Balkans”.⁷⁸ Along similar lines, Polish MEP Zdzisław Krasnodębski, the ECR Shadow Rapporteur for Serbia, has been explicit in conveying that Serbia cannot be allowed into the EU for as long as it holds such a narrow friendship with Moscow.⁷⁹ Croatia's only ECR MEP, Ladislav Ilčić, has been equally critical of Serbia over the past legislature—a clear sign of the lingering hostility that Croatian conservatives profess towards Belgrade.⁸⁰

⁷² European Conservatives and Reformists, 2024. *MEPs*. Available at: <https://ecrgroup.eu/ecr/meps>

⁷³ Mudde, C. 2024. The Far Right and the 2024 European Elections. *Intereconomics*, 59(2), pp. 61-65.

⁷⁴ Cunningham, K. et al. 2024.

⁷⁵ European Conservatives and Reformists, 2023. *EU and US must better coordinate on foreign policy*. 9 November. Available at: https://ecrgroup.eu/article/eu_and_us_must_better_coordinate_on_foreign_policy

⁷⁶ European Conservatives and Reformists, 2022. *New Perspectives for the Western Balkans*, p. 2. Available at: https://ecrgroup.eu/files/A_new_perspective_for_western_balkans_11-05-22_%28reduced%29.pdf

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Id., p. 20.

⁷⁹ Id., p. 19.

⁸⁰ European Parliament. 2023. *Verbatim report of proceedings – 2022 Report on Kosovo (debate)*. 9 May. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2023-05-09-ITM-019_EN.html

Ahead of the 2024 elections, an important dimension to the ECR's potential consolidation as the EP's third-largest group will be the role played by **Fidesz**, the party of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. In early 2021, Fidesz **left the EPP** following an announcement from Orbán himself, where he accused the group of conducting "antidemocratic, unjust and unacceptable" actions. This came just amid the EPP's preparations for an imminent removal of Fidesz's MEPs from the group after years of discord and tensions, and following their de facto suspension in 2019.⁸¹ In the light of this fallout, the 12 Fidesz MEPs went on to join the non-attached segment of the EP, and are **currently not affiliated** to any of the groups.⁸² As of June 2024, this could change if Fidesz would enter the ECR, as it would endow the group with its third-largest MEP country delegation after Italy and Poland.⁸³ The main dilemma for the ECR, however, is whether Fidesz's integration into the group's ranks should be enacted—not least given **Orbán's friendly relations with Vladimir Putin's Russia**. Budapest's close alignment with Moscow poses a serious problem for not few ECR-affiliated parties from, among other Member States, Poland and Czechia, who eye Russia with enmity and suspicion. Moreover, since the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the ECR has been very engaged in the EP for sanctions against Moscow and for aid to Kyiv, a view particularly spearheaded by Italian Prime Minister and ECR President Giorgia Meloni.⁸⁴

In this light, following the June elections, the ECR is **set to remain supportive of enlargement** as a foreign policy strategy—for as long as it helps fulfil each national party's domestic narrative. It should be expected, for instance, that Croatian MEPs will be particularly critical towards Serbia's EU accession bid, and that Bulgarian MEPs will remain sceptical of North Macedonia's candidacy. It is also likely that the ECR will retain its interest in defending the EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans **in the framework of Russia's creeping influence** in the region and as a tool to keep Moscow's threats at bay. However, the Spanish, Romanian, Finnish and Swedish ECR delegations, which are expected to double in size, might contribute to an increasing **enlargement schism** within the group—especially through the latter two, whose voting patterns rather resembled those of the more radical (and definitely anti-enlargement) ID group.⁸⁵

3.6. Identity and Democracy (ID)

Alongside the ECR, ID is the political group that has managed to consolidate itself to the right of the EPP and channel the demands of the most extreme right-wing and Eurosceptic voters. ID has been the **sixth largest group** in the EP at 59 seats, with members from 8 Member States—with Italy's Lega and France's Rassemblement National (RN) parties providing the largest amount, at 23 and 18 MEPs, respectively.⁸⁶ Polls estimate that the ID group could become **the third largest group** in the EP, right after the EPP and the S&D, **or the fourth largest**, should ECR garner more seats. ID-affiliated parties enjoy strong voter popularity in several Member States, and are

⁸¹ De La Baume, M. 2021. Orbán's Fidesz quits EPP group in European Parliament. *Politico*. 3 March. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/epp-suspension-rules-fidesz-european-parliament-viktor-orban-hungary/>

⁸² European Parliament. 2024. *Hungary – Non-attached Members*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/search/advanced?euPoliticalGroupBodyRefNum=2970&countryCode=HU>

⁸³ Cunningham, K. et al. 2024.

⁸⁴ Palokaj, A. 2023. 'Krvna slika' Europe bit će poznata za manje od 100 dana, ulazi nikad veći, sve oči uprte u Belgiju i Nizozemsku. *Jutarnji List*. 8 March. Available at: <https://www.jutarnji.hr/globus/politika/krvna-slika-europe-bit-ce-poznata-za-manje-od-100-dana-ulozi-nikad-veci-sve-oci-uprte-u-belgiju-i-nizozemsku-15436790>

⁸⁵ 2024. Charlie Weimers (SD): "Vi röstar alltid för ett mindre EU". *Riks*. 14 March. Available at: <https://riks.se/charlie-weimers-sd-vi-rostar-alltid-for-ett-mindre-eu/>

⁸⁶ Identity and Democracy. 2024. *MEPs*. Available at: <https://www.idgroup.eu/members>

expected to reap significant gains in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Bulgaria, and Austria.⁸⁷

The ID's views on enlargement respond to the group's underpinning identity-based premise: the EU should not exist, and should therefore not enlarge.⁸⁸ These views are chiefly based upon **xenophobic and Islamophobic narratives**, where enlarging the EU is perceived as a threat to the identity and the security of Europe's Christian nations and citizens.⁸⁹ In Member States that are net EU contributors—such as the Netherlands, Germany and France—ID-affiliated parties see enlargement, furthermore, as an **unjust and uncontrolled flow of EU funds** to poor countries at their expense.⁹⁰ In opposition to the ECR, which is staunchly pro-Ukraine and pro-NATO, the ID group is **rather ambivalent about Russia** and gathers some of the EU's most Moscow-friendly parties, like France's RN and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ).⁹¹ During the ninth EP legislature, the group almost **systematically opposed** any text related to enlargement to the Western Balkans—with only the Italian MEPs from Lega tending to vote in favour.⁹² The group particularly showcased active opposition to Kosovo's statehood and EU integration, having termed the country as “a criminal and mafia pseudo-State plagued with Islamism” and upholding Serbia's rightful control over it.⁹³ In 2023, representatives of German ID member Alternative for Germany (AfD) met with Serbian politician Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, leader of the far-right party Zavetnici that advocates for Serbia's annexation of Kosovo.⁹⁴

The ID's expected growth following the elections is likely to **empower its radical anti-enlargement sentiment**, being able to attract like-minded MEPs from other groups—namely from the ECR and the EPP, but also among the non-attached—in key votes. However, given the group's **lonely positioning** on fundamental geopolitical questions, such as the role of NATO and the EU's relations with Russia, it is quite probable that it will for the most part remain a pariah group in the chamber, at least in what concerns EU enlargement. The ID's potential consolidation as the third largest group in the EP, thus overtaking the ECR, can furthermore be highly dependent on the **future affiliation of Hungary's Fidesz**. Should Orbán's party not obtain membership in the ECR, the ID has emerged as a plausible alternative. Gunnar Beck, Vice-President of the group, has eyed Fidesz as a close ideological ally and is open for it to join: “Fidesz would of course be welcome here in the ID if they requested membership”, he said in early 2024.⁹⁵ Potential clashes would however emerge in the realm of enlargement, of which Orbán's party is extremely supportive.

⁸⁷ Cunningham, K. et al. 2024.

⁸⁸ Interview with Augustin Palokaj, Brussels-based correspondent on EU affairs. Online, 11 March 2024.

⁸⁹ European Parliament. 2024. *Verbatim report of proceedings – Deepening EU integration in view of future enlargement (debate)*. 28 February. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2024-02-28-ITM-020_EN.html

⁹⁰ Peeperkorn, M. 2023. ‘Dit is waanzin’: ook de Europese Unie zal het effect van Wilders voelen. *De Morgen*. 24 November. Available at: <https://www.demorgen.be/nieuws/dit-is-waanzin-ook-de-europese-unie-zal-het-effect-van-wilders-voelen~bd2e8849/>

⁹¹ AFP. 2024. Right-Wing Nationalists Rising — and Divided — as EU Vote Looms. *Voice of America*. 10 March. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/right-wing-nationalists-rising---and-divided---as-eu-vote-looms-7521367.html>

⁹² European Parliament. 2024. *Plenary sitting – Texts adopted*.

⁹³ European Parliament. 2023. *Verbatim report of proceedings – 2022 Report on Kosovo (debate)*. 9 May.

⁹⁴ 2023. Đurđević Stamenkovski dobila podršku čelnika AFD u Bundestagu. *Beta*. 17 November. Available at: <https://beta.rs/content/194463-durdevic-stamenkovski-dobila-podrsku-celnika-afd-u-bundestagu>

⁹⁵ Neubert, K. 2024. Far-right ID group invites Orbán's Fidesz to join their ranks. *Euractiv*. 1 February. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/far-right-id-group-invites-hungarys-fidesz-to-join-their-ranks/>

3.7. The Left (GUE/NGL)

The Left has held 36 seats in the EP, making it the **seventh and smallest group**, with members from 13 Member States—with France, Spain and Germany providing the largest amount.⁹⁶ Early 2024 polls point towards a modest upsurge in voter support, with a projected 44 MEPs, likely at the expense of the S&D and the Greens/EFA. The group would still remain seventh and last in size, and is expected to make most gains in Germany, France, and Ireland.⁹⁷

Throughout the legislature, the Left showed a **confrontational demeanor** in the foreign policy realm and a particularly **ambivalent approach towards Russia**.⁹⁸ While EU enlargement did not feature among its top priorities, the group made use of the topic to mainstream its green and worker-centric agenda. For example, French Left MEP Manon Aubry declared that EU enlargement must be contingent on the harmonisation of all social, fiscal and environmental norms before being pushed forward.⁹⁹ The Left also built upon the ongoing EU enlargement thrust to advance its foreign policy narrative, **having largely criticised the EU's pressure on Serbia** to align against Russia, and condemning the EU-led neoliberal reforms in the region that have established precarious work as the norm, usually for the benefit of foreign Western investors.¹⁰⁰

In the light of the Left's prospective gains after the EP elections, the group is likely to pursue an **EU-critical approach to enlargement** and further advocate for economic and social convergence between EU Member States and the Western Balkans as prerequisites for accession. For Kosovo, the group's position vis-à-vis Serbia and Russia can become damaging inasmuch as it can channel narratives supportive of Moscow, with which even the ID group can align. The overall rise of the Left and the ID groups, namely EU critics at either side of the spectrum, could grant them around 37 percent of the EP seats combined—compared to the 30 percent they have held during the ninth legislature.¹⁰¹

3.8. Non-attached (NI)

By the end of the ninth legislature, **50 MEPs** found themselves not attached to any political group in the EP, the Hungarian and Italian delegations being the largest—with 13 and 9 members, respectively. Ahead of the 2024 elections, it is projected that the number of non-attached MEPs will drop slightly, gathering a diversity of ideologies that would include Hungary's Fidesz, Italy's left-wing Five Star Movement, and Slovakia's ruling Direction – Social Democracy (SMER), among others.

The prospects regarding the EU's enlargement policy among the non-attached MEPs is volatile and highly dependent on the **fluctuating ideological mosaic** of the group, as it features green, progressive, liberal, conservative and ultra-conservative voices. Much of its influence will therefore draw, for instance, from the political group Fidesz decides to join, or from the

⁹⁶ The Left in the European Parliament. *Our MEPs*. Available at: <https://left.eu/meps/?page=1>

⁹⁷ Cunningham, K. et al. 2024.

⁹⁸ Connelly, T. 2022. Irish MEPs among the least critical of Russia – report. *RTÉ*. 23 June. Available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/2022/0623/1306432-europe-report/>

⁹⁹ Basso, D. and P. Messad. 2023. Manon Aubry : « L'opacité est le poison de l'UE ». *Euractiv*. 22 November. Available at: https://www.euractiv.fr/section/elections/interview/manon-aubry-lopacite-est-le-poison-de-lue/?_ga=2.79664914.787893152.1712067446-1077736281.1712067445

¹⁰⁰ European Parliament. 2023. *Verbatim report of proceedings – 2022 Report on Serbia (debate)*. 9 May. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-9-2023-05-09-ITM-018_EN.html

¹⁰¹ Cunningham, K. et al. 2024.

expectedly significant number of far-right MEPs that will not be affiliated to neither the ECR nor the ID and will thus remain among the non-attached.

4. ENTER THE NEW COMMISSION

The EP's **tenth legislature** is set to begin the 16th July 2024, when the body's constitutive plenary session will take place and when, shortly thereafter, the President of the chamber will be elected. From that point on, the 720 MEPs are expected to vote on an array of matters, including the numerical composition of EP committees and subcommittees.¹⁰² **Intense negotiations** are bound to ensue in an ever more fragmented EP to determine the EU's top jobs, not least within the Union's foremost executive institution: the EC.

4.1. A shift to the right? Electing the College of Commissioners

The **election of the President of the EC** is possibly the most relevant appointment that follows the constitutive session of the EP. The chamber is set to elect the President of the EC following a **proposal from the European Council**, whose suggested candidate will first need to present their political guidelines before the 720 MEPs. They will need **the approval of a majority**, 361 MEPs, to be appointed. Most political groups in the EP have put forward their main contenders, among which incumbent EC President Ursula von der Leyen leads the EPP's candidacy.¹⁰³

The role of the EC in proposing and implementing legislation, driving the policy agenda and representing the EU within and beyond its borders, has usually been supportive—with some hiatus along the way—of the enlargement process to the Western Balkans. Von der Leyen's rhetoric rendered the EU's enlargement ambitions clear from the start of her mandate, during which Russia's invasion of Ukraine prompted an even faster tempo. Experts point towards a **likely continuation** of this thrust if she achieves a second mandate at the helm of the EC.¹⁰⁴

The **final composition of the College of Commissioners**, including the presidency of the EC, is a direct product of **political bargaining** among EU Member States—as each of the 27 representatives in this body is nominated by a Member State. Despite the independent role of the Commissioners, who pledge to act in the EU's best interest and not cater to the advantage of their Member States, this has not always proved completely infallible in the past, so the ideological positioning of each of the 27 governments is key in the process of striking a balance among the Commissioners' political backgrounds and avoiding the clientelisation of the College. This comes at a time when major shifts within the European Council could be expected in the upcoming months, as the influence of far-right parties increases in several Member States.¹⁰⁵ This could pose serious threats to the salience of enlargement as a policy item, since the agenda-setting priorities of a more illiberal and right-leaning European Council could push the topic down the priority list. France, Austria and the Netherlands are instances where **enlargement-sceptical, extreme-right representatives** could obtain a seat at European Council meetings, making

¹⁰² European Parliament. 2024. *After the European elections - What happens after 10 June*. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/press-tool-kit/6/after-the-european-elections>

¹⁰³ European People's Party. 2024. *EPP Congress elects its lead candidate for European Commission President*. Available at: <https://www.epp.eu/news/epp-congress-elects-its-lead-candidate-for-european-commission-president>

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Engjellushe Morina, Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). Online, 19 March 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Augustin Palokaj, Brussels-based correspondent on EU affairs. Online, 11 March 2024.

unanimous decisions around enlargement all the more challenging to achieve. ECR member parties are already in the governments of Italy, Czechia and Finland, while ID member parties hold ministerial positions in Italy and Slovakia—and might do so, too, in Croatia through the far-right Homeland Movement (DP).¹⁰⁶

4.2. A prized enlargement portfolio

The EU's relations with the Western Balkans, chiefly within the enlargement framework, are coordinated and run by the EC's DG NEAR, itself led by the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement. The 2019-2024 mandate of Hungarian Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi at the helm of DG NEAR has been subject to severe criticism due to his close ties to the government in Budapest, and has raised the thorny question of **which Member State will procure the enlargement portfolio** in the new College of Commissioners.

Among the 27 Member States, six have had political representatives holding the EU's enlargement competencies: Germany, Slovenia¹⁰⁷, Finland, Czechia, Austria, and Hungary. In terms of the Commissioners' European political affiliations at the start of their mandates, the EPP, the S&D, and Renew all had two representatives each. This history conveys a picture of obvious geographical predilection, inasmuch as a major share of Enlargement Commissioners have come from **either a 2004 'big bang enlargement' Member State**—Slovenia, Czechia and Hungary—or **an enlargement-friendly, geographically close Member State**—Germany and Austria—evidencing vested interests in the strategic use of the portfolio.

In early 2024, two main hypotheses revolve around the origin of the future enlargement appointee. The first supposes the continuation of the **'first-hand experience' approach** with the appointment of a Commissioner from a Member State that entered the EU in 2004—such as Poland, Slovakia, or any of the three Baltic States. The position would be politically and technically suitable for a Commissioner whose Member State underwent the accession process two decades ago and is thus **sensitive to the process**, endowing the experiences of the Western Balkans with a sympathetic counterpart in Brussels—that can also resonate in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia.¹⁰⁸ It is difficult for Hungary to retain the portfolio in the light of the criticism received, in which light a similar situation could emerge in the case of Slovakia. However, the recently inaugurated government in Bratislava, which has raised eyebrows for its illiberal leanings and narrow links with Russia, would make **the appointment of a Slovak Enlargement Commissioner a prolongation of the Hungarian experience** and a likely no-go for many Member States.¹⁰⁹

A second speculation points towards the **technical approach**, namely the nomination of a Commissioner from the 'older Europe' Member States which have traditionally held conditional views on enlarging the EU. The prospective frugality of a more technical Commissioner, but their

¹⁰⁶ Müller, M. 2024. *European Parliament seat projection (January 2024): Left and Liberals lose, far-right ID group becomes third largest force*. Der (europäische) Föderalist. 11 January. Available at: <https://www.foederalist.eu/2024/01/ep-seat-projection-january-2024.html>

¹⁰⁷ Immediately after its entry into the EU, Slovenia co-held the enlargement portfolio with Germany for a six-month period.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Engjellushe Morina, Senior Policy Fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). Online, 19 March 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Pollet, M. 2024. *Slovak PM: Ukraine must give up territory to end Russian invasion*. Politico. 21 January. Available here: <https://www.politico.eu/article/slovakia-prime-minister-robert-fico-ukraine-cede-territory-russia-moscow-invasion-nato-entry/>

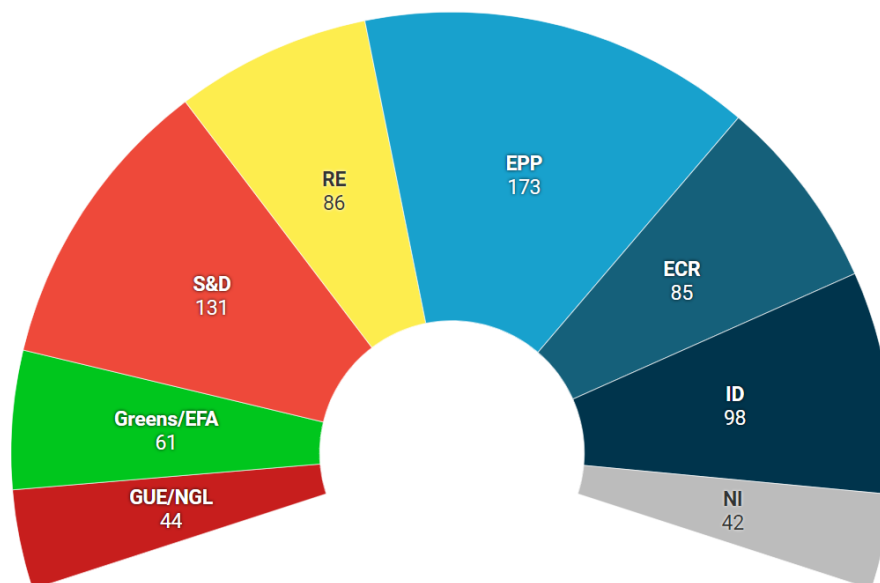
openness to some merit-based concessions, could potentially help dispel doubts over the emotional nature of enlargement and **render the approach more methodological**.

For the benefit of the Western Balkan countries and for the credibility of the enlargement policy in general, the future Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement should gather **political sensitivity towards the question of enlargement** but should also showcase **technical rigor** to reaffirm the merit-based nature of the process. For Kosovo in particular, the appointment of a Commissioner from one of the five non-recognising Member States would come as an ill omen for the country's EU aspirations—while only symbolically, this scenario would spark many doubts around the **political impartiality of the appointee** and their cabinet. In this regard, a Commissioner nominated by a recognising Member State would come as a more balanced and less one-sided decision.

5. THREE POST-ELECTION SCENARIOS

The results of the 2024 EP elections are up in the air. According to recent polls and projections, however, certain trends are bound to crystallise ahead of voting day. It is likely that **the EP will become more right-leaning** given the expected rise of the ECR and ID groups—even despite a slight decrease of the EPP—but especially in the light of the substantive loss in support for green, centre-left and liberal forces. In a yet unforeseeable post-electoral context, **three main scenarios** can be traced—each bringing about an array of EU-wide implications for the Western Balkans, and for Kosovo in particular. Each scenario is defined according to its potential degree of sympathy and leverage vis-à-vis the enlargement agenda, both towards the region and towards Kosovo: a **best-case scenario**, where a (rather unlikely) progressive coalition spearheads the EU's enlargement thrust; a **status quo scenario**, where the current centrist coalition is able to continue with some caveats; and a **worst-case scenario**, where a right-wing majority EP helps entrench an enlargement-sceptic agenda.

Figure 1. Projected seat distribution of the EP



Source: European Council on Foreign Relations.

5.1. Best-case scenario: an unlikely progressive breakthrough

The EU accession prospects of the Western Balkans, and of Kosovo in particular, would likely benefit the most in a context where **the progressive forces of the EP**—namely the S&D, the Greens/EFA, and perhaps even the Left—**plus the liberals** from Renew could gather a majority. Most of these parties' MEPs have consistently shown unequivocal support for the EU's enlargement agenda and have been **critical of democratic backsliding** in candidate and potential candidate countries, evidencing their backing of a constructive and rule of law-based accession process. The EPP, despite its active pro-enlargement approach, includes several MEPs that oppose Kosovo's integration prospects and have systematically voted against EP texts on the matter—hence its exclusion from this scenario. Early 2024 polls indicate, however, that the left-wing coalition encompassing the S&D, the Greens/EFA and the Left will lose seats and go on to hold 33 percent of the total. A similar fate awaits Renew, which would lose 15 percent of its current seats. Thus, even if a potential left-wing coalition could muster the support of the Renew group, as has happened in the current term for some agenda items, **they would only gather 45 percent of the seats.**¹¹⁰ Furthermore, as far as enlargement is concerned, it is unlikely that the Left, based on previous parliamentary activity, would hold a convergent view—let alone a constructive one—vis-à-vis that of the other groups in the coalition.

Key to the attainment of a best-case scenario for Kosovo is the EP's appointment of a **Standing Rapporteur** from a political party that is **sympathetic to the country's aspirations**. The Rapporteur is the MEP responsible for handling an EC-drafted legislative proposal, both in procedure and in substance; in the case of the six Western Balkan countries, this falls on one assigned MEP per country.¹¹¹ The **past appointments of Green MEPs** Ulrike Lunacek (2009-2019) and Viola von Cramon-Taubadel (2019-2024) as Rapporteurs for Kosovo have evidenced the interest the group holds in this position. During the ninth legislature, furthermore, the role of von Cramon-Taubadel was instrumental in striking certain Kosovo-favourable breakthroughs at an EP level.¹¹² A best-case scenario would therefore hint towards continuity in this regard and envision for the Kosovo rapporteurship to be awarded to a party that wishes to take the country's EU integration process forward critically and constructively.

In a best-case scenario, and as far as the new College of Commissioners is concerned, Kosovo would largely benefit from an Enlargement Commissioner appointed **by a recognising Member State**—besides Hungary—that would help dispel any potential doubts around their political bias. An ideal outcome could possibly involve the appointment of a Commissioner from one of the 2004 enlargement Eastern European Member States that showcases a **political balance** between the Western Balkans and the Associated Trio and takes the processes of both sets of countries in parallel.

5.2. Status quo scenario: the centrist coalition

Unlike other EU policy areas, such as environment, budgetary control or home affairs, enlargement does not create particularly heated discussions across EP party groups, as the vast majority has traditionally held very positive views. In this sense, a likely (and not fully negative)

¹¹⁰ Cunningham, K. et al. 2024.

¹¹¹ 2019. Final EP Rapporteurs revealed: Bilčík for Serbia, Rangel for Bosnia and Herzegovina. *EWB*. 22 October. Available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/10/22/final-ep-rapporteurs-revealed-bilcik-for-serbia-rangel-for-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>

¹¹² Interview with Đorđe Bojović, Western Balkans Advisor in the Office of MEP Viola von Cramon-Taubadel. Online, 12 March 2024.

scenario would involve the **continuity of the current centrist coalition**—the EPP, the S&D and Renew—with extensive **support from the Greens and ECR on enlargement matters**, leading to a factual maintenance of the *status quo*. Besides a few MEPs who can be sceptical about the EU integration of specific Western Balkan countries, mostly upon domestic reservations, **a large majority in the chamber is supportive** of the region’s accession. Early 2024 polls indicate that the three-party coalition could gather **54 percent** of the seats altogether, to which the additional support from the Greens would allow for comfortable majorities. The EPP would hold much of the decision-making power in entering into agreements with the parties to its right, especially with the ECR.

The *status quo* scenario would envisage for the role of Standing Rapporteur for Kosovo to fall on a Green MEP for yet another legislature, ensuring stability in the reporting and building upon the group’s years-long institutional knowledge as holder. It remains to be seen, nonetheless, whether the Greens’ shrinking prospects **will allow for the group to bid for this role at all**. In regard to the enlargement portfolio within the EC, this scenario would enable an outcome similar to the best-case scenario: the Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement would come from a recognising Member State, which would water down any preliminary concerns of political bias. The **reappointment of a Hungarian Commissioner** for this portfolio would however be very unlikely.

5.3. Worst-case scenario: a sharp turn to the right

The least favourable scenario for the EU accession prospects of the Western Balkans, and of Kosovo in particular, would emerge in a context where **the most conservative forces of the EP**—namely the ECR and the ID groups—**plus the EPP** would gather a majority. In such a scenario, populist conservative voices will feel emboldened following their likely EU-wide wins, and enlargement as a policy item can become increasingly **tied to discussions around security and immigration**—both from the Western Balkans and across the so-called ‘Balkan route’—encouraging bilateral disputes to linger, and pushing goals of economic development and regional reconciliation down the priority list. According to polls, a potential ‘populist right coalition’ of the three groups could reach **49 percent** of the seats in the EP, up from the previous 43 percent. A large share of non-attached MEPs—which tend to come from extreme-right parties—could also join this group, thanks to which parliamentary majorities could be reached.¹¹³

A worst-case scenario would foresee for the role of Standing Rapporteur for Kosovo to fall under the responsibility of an ID, or even an ECR, MEP. The almost unanimous opposition to Kosovo’s accession prospects within the former group, and the occasional reservations within the latter, could render the reporting responsibilities **an exercise of political erosion and distortion** that would take a heavy toll on Kosovo’s influence within the EU. Similar scenarios could replicate in the EP’s Delegations—smaller groups of MEPs that maintain relations with the parliaments of non-EU countries and with regions—and where the Delegation for relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (DSEE) is currently competent for Kosovo. In a conservative-majority context, the DSEE’s agenda, yearly Missions, and outcome documents would run the risk of **regularly and deliberately portraying Kosovo in a bad light**.¹¹⁴

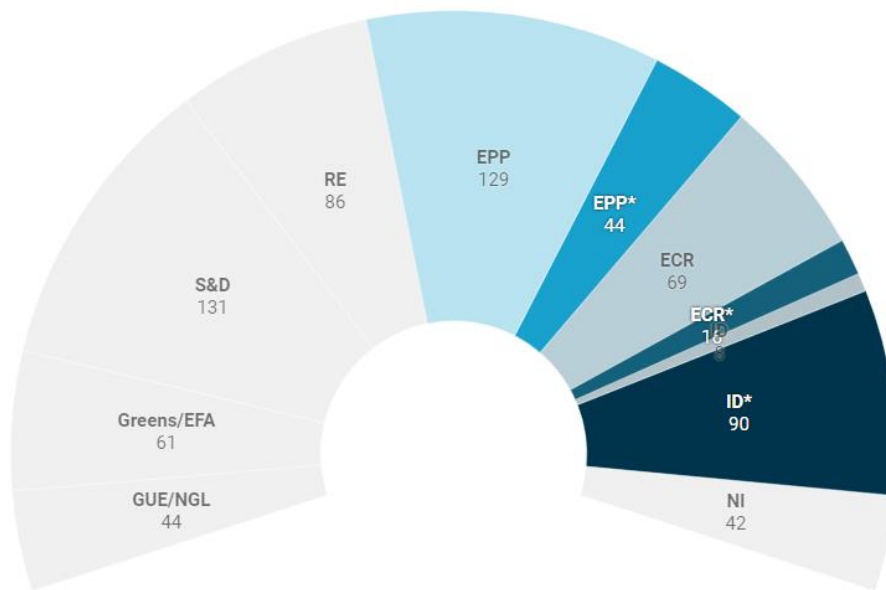
In a worst-case scenario, the EP would become an **increasingly hostile space for Kosovo**. The virtual majority of the ID group, plus some MEPs from the ECR and EPP groups—mostly from non-recognising Member States—and other far-right MEPs from the non-attached group would be

¹¹³ Id.

¹¹⁴ Interview with the Office of MEP Romeo Franz. Online, 3 April 2024.

opposed from the outset to any policy attempt at integrating Kosovo into the EU. As Figure 2 shows, at least 150 MEPs (20 percent) could fall into this category and confront Kosovo’s integration at any cost—be it due to their overall opposition to enlargement, or due to holding a negative view on Kosovo’s sovereignty. In this scenario, within the College of Commissioners, Kosovo would benefit the least if an Enlargement Commissioner coming from a non-recognising Member State—especially Spain, Cyprus or Slovakia—was appointed.

Figure 2. Projected MEPs opposed to Kosovo within right-wing party groups



* The EPP group (44 MEPs) includes the Spanish, Slovak and Cypriot delegations, plus parts of the Greek and Romanian delegations. The ECR group (16 MEPs) includes the Spanish, Swedish and Finnish delegations. The ID group (90 MEPs) includes all delegations except the Italian.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the upcoming EP elections are bound to shed direct light on the new ideological configuration of the EU, where the unstoppable rise of the populist far right is set to feature as one of the foremost axes of change. In parallel, progressive and liberal forces are expected to lose a significant share of voter support—to the likely disadvantage of the EU’s foreign and enlargement policies.

The new EP will gather what could be **the largest number of anti-enlargement MEPs** in its history, against which Kosovo’s EU aspirations are likely to find themselves at risk. An even more challenging aspect to take on board will be the fact that most MEPs from non-recognising Member States—especially within the EPP and ECR groups, and less so within the S&D group—will likely follow their domestic agendas rather than that of their respective group, leading to **internal schisms concerning Kosovo** and preventing the groups from holding unified positions around Prishtina’s integration.

Although the EP is the institution endowed with the task of directly electing the EC’s new College of Commissioners at a plenary vote, **the results of the EP elections will not have a direct impact on the nominations to the College**—as these correspond to the 27 Member States in

negotiations among themselves and with the President of the EC. However, the new EC will very clearly feed from the priority- and agenda-setting process that a more right-wing EP will advocate for. In all, it will be on Kosovo and its EU allies to persevere in the promotion of Prishtina's accession ambitions and to artfully navigate the ups and downs of an increasingly hostile geopolitical era.

In light of the above, this paper puts forward the following recommendations:

- 1. The EP's pro-Kosovo majority must be loudly heard.** Despite the considerable rise of the Eurosceptic and anti-enlargement far right, the new EP will remain majorly supportive of Kosovo and its EU integration prospects. Political groups in the EP must thus keep advocating for the scrapping of EU sanctions against Kosovo and for a resolution to the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue that involves mutual recognition. The EC and the 27 Member States should work towards the enactment of these calls.
- 2. The isolation of anti-enlargement forces needs to persist.** The future pro-enlargement majority within the EP must enhance its efforts to further isolate the radical parties that oppose it, namely through establishing a *cordon sanitaire* against the ID and barring it from attaining key roles in the EP Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET), responsible for enlargement matters, or in the DSEE. Furthermore, the progressive and liberal forces of the EP—including the S&D, Greens/EFA, Renew and also the Left—should unite their negotiation efforts to prevent the role of EP Standing Rapporteur for Kosovo from falling under the responsibility of the EPP, the ECR or the ID—where some of their MEPs are not sympathetic to the country's aspirations and could therefore jeopardise an unbiased reporting.
- 3. Fundamentals first: a strong and technical enlargement portfolio.** The European Council and the EC President-elect should nominate a politically and technically strong figure for the role of Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement—which could furthermore hold an EC Vice-President role—to send out a message of earnest commitment to enlarging the EU. The future Commissioner should be able to balance the 'emotional' and 'technical' approaches to enlargement, through understanding first-hand both the political importance of the Western Balkans' EU accession and the necessary merit-based nature of the process. The future Commissioner should, moreover, be nominated by a Member State that recognises Kosovo—which will immediately dispel any doubts about any potential political bias that could negatively impact Kosovo's bid.
- 4. Kosovo must persevere—in spite of its enemies.** There is no alternative to Kosovo's EU path. The times ahead are challenging, not least in the current geopolitically and ideologically hostile context, but the government in Prishtina needs to keep pushing for Kosovo's case to be heard across the EU. At least 20 percent of the new EP could be potentially opposed to Kosovo's accession ambitions, be it due to their overall opposition to enlargement, or due to holding a negative view on Kosovo's sovereignty—which will make the country's process easier to undermine. To counter this, Kosovo must accelerate and strengthen its democratic reforms to consolidate itself further as a democratically credible partner. This, alongside adopting a more politically flexible position vis-à-vis its international allies, can eventually help bring Kosovo at a more comfortable and influential position—particularly in the framework of its dialogue with Serbia—contributing to restore its image as a cooperative and reliable party.

Policy Analysis

Policy Analysis in general is a policy advice paper which particularly aims to influence the key means through which policy decisions are made in both local and central levels of government. The purpose of Policy Analysis is to address, more in-depth, a particular problem, to examine the arguments related to a concerned policy, and to analyze the implementation of the policy. Through Policy Analysis, Group for Legal and Political studies seeks to stimulate wider comprehensive debate on the given issue via presenting informed policy-relevant choices and recommendations to the key stakeholders and parties of interest.



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