Peterson Institute for International Economics

The geopolitics of EU enlargement
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[00:00:20.27] - Nicolas Véron

Morning, good afternoon, good evening, wherever you're in the world. I'm Nicholas Véran. It's my pleasure to introduce this new session of What Now Europe, the series at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. And now we're going to talk about Europe. But what exactly is Europe? Because Europe's boundaries keep changing, if by Europe we mean the European Union. That process of bringing in new members— I'm not talking about Brexit now— is what the EU jargon refers to as enlargement. And there is a Director General for enlargement at the European Commission, so we couldn't have a better speaker today to talk about enlargement. Gertjan Koopman has studied economics, Latin, and Greek at University of Amsterdam. Amsterdam, especially Latin and Greek, I think makes him the ideal person for the job. Uh, he then started a career as lecturer in economics at, uh, Utrecht University in the Netherlands. In 1987, he went into public policy, joining CPB Netherlands, a kind of internal think tank of the Dutch government. And in '91, he joined the European Commission, which— where he has stayed ever since. On increasingly hot-button issues. It seems that you're Mr. Fix-It of the European Commission, Gert-Jaap.

[00:01:35.18]

You started at DG ECFIN, the Directorate General of the department tasked with economic and financial matters, and you spent 10 years at the cabinet of Neil Kinnock, the British Commissioner, as we used to have at the time. You ended as his Head of Cabinet. That's, for non-Europeans, that's head of staff, chief of staff, basically. Then you went back into staff positions at the Directorate General for Enterprise and Industries and back to ECFIN. Then at the Directorate General for Competition Policy, you were the chief state aid control enforcer for much of the 2010s. That was very important in terms of the banking sector and bailout police. And then you've been a Director General of two DGs successively for the budget when the EU implemented the Next Generation EU program. So the first-time deployment of EU funding and spending at scale in that kind of environment. And now at DG, which when you joined was called Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations, but was renamed last year Enlargement and Eastern Neighborhood, which really tells the story that enlargement is now front and center. So with that, Gertjan, over to you. There are lots of discussions about Montenegro, Albania, Iceland, of course Ukraine.

[00:03:00.10]

How should we make sense of all that?

[00:03:04.05] - Gert Jan Koopman

Great to be on the program, Nicolas. Good afternoon, good evening, good morning to anyone who's following this. Yes, you are right. I think enlargement is a key priority of the European Union. And it's a key priority for reasons that are a bit different from from those that prevailed 20 years ago when the last big wave of enlargement took place. For those of you who follow the EU, you'll know that in 2004 we had a wave of 10 member states joining. The last member state that actually joined the EU only joined in 2013. That was Croatia. And then afterwards enlargement basically ground to a halt. But the reason that it's now so dynamic, of course, is that We have a war that has entered its 5th year on our continent. And the Ukrainians have made it very, very clear that they see their future in Europe, not just geographically, physically, culturally, emotionally, but they want to be a member state of the EU. We've granted them candidate status, which means that we, in principle, accept that they will be a member state provided they meet the rules of the game. And that has really reignited the debate about enlargement from a geopolitical strategic standpoint.

[00:04:22.10]

We've had candidate countries in the Western Balkans, the 6, who have been negotiating some for a very long time indeed, but the war in the east has also revitalized that drive, and there are 2 countries who are actually racing forward pretty dramatically in the Western Balkans, Montenegro and Albania. When we talk about the East, there's also Moldova, a very interesting example of a country that used to be a former Soviet Republic, as you know, also a candidate for membership, making equally dramatic progress on its EU path. And then very recently, just earlier this week, a referendum took place in Iceland, which for a while was a candidate country and then decided it didn't want to be a candidate country anymore and now is going to be organizing organizing a referendum on whether they should throw in their hat again. So, I think all of this shows that in a world where big power politics plays out, countries in our neighborhood want to join, we have an interest in taking them on board, not just for economic reasons, but also for security reasons. So, yeah, it's a dynamic portfolio. Thank you.

[00:05:36.24] - Nicolas Véron

So, tell us a bit, you mentioned Albania and Montenegro, I don't know if it's in that order, closest maybe now with Iceland, depending on referendum result, to joining, at least ostensibly. When is that going to happen? What is the earliest possible date? And what are the hurdles?

[00:05:57.25] - Gert Jan Koopman

No, thank you very much. Well, the country that is most advanced technically is Montenegro, which is in the process of finalizing the negotiations chapter by chapter. We organize these negotiations by relevant part of our rulebook. Uh, and, uh, the, uh, essential breakdown is in chapters. There are 33 chapters, and Montenegro is now closing the last chapters. They've set themselves the target of negotiating the last chapter still this year, after which an accession treaty would then be signed, and that accession treaty would then have to be ratified, uh, by all of our member states depending on their constitutional, uh, uh, requirements, which means that at the earliest if everything goes well, Montenegro could join in 2028. I would say that Albania and Moldova are hot on the heels, that, that would probably be a year later if they stick to their own timelines. They started a bit later. And, and, and for Ukraine, there is a similar perspective. I have to underline, let me be very clear, that these are technical projections. Obviously, these are deeply political choices eventually. And one important feature that will dominate decision-making is whether they actually demonstrate through a track record that they're ready.

[00:07:18.03]

So it's not just a matter of ticking the boxes, putting the rules on the statute books, but actually showing in practice that the rule of law functions properly, that corruption is being fought effectively, and that they can manage to operate in our internal market, which is the biggest internal market of the world. So, you know, it's not mechanical exercise. Ultimately, also very important to keep in mind, as I said, every member state has to ratify. The member state you know best, Nicolas, France, needs a very large majority, 60% in both houses of parliament or a referendum. So that's a very sensitive issue. And interestingly, despite the fact that enlargement has been an enormous success economically, socially, just probably objectively speaking from any possible perspective, the perception in some of our member states is not quite the same. So it's not a foregone conclusion that a completed accession treaty will automatically be ratified by every member state. There's a huge need for discussion, outreach, and engagement. So that makes it all very dynamic. It means that you can't really forecast exactly when accession will happen, but what the candidate countries can do is get ready It's in their own interest.

[00:08:34.20]

It's a vast upgrade of their operating systems. And that is what the countries I mentioned are doing right now.

[00:08:41.05] - Nicolas Véron

You mentioned those 33 chapters. This is a massive amount of legislation and regulation, right? Basically, it's about aligning their legislative and regulatory framework with every single EU regulation and directive and technical standards there is and making sure they comply with everything under EU law, right?

[00:09:03.26] - Gert Jan Koopman

Yeah, well, it's, it's, it's that, and this is a massive undertaking, which actually, because the EU is so deeply integrated, is now much more challenging than it was 20 years ago when the EU was a lot less integrated. We, we reckon if you express it in number of pages, uh, you know, laws expressed in number of pages, that the, the task has doubled in terms of size. So just to give you a sense, but it's not just the laws and the regulations. We also look at something we call fundamentals, which is about justice, it's about the democracy, the fight against corruption, the rule of law. And here, you know, this is not about hard legislation where the EU prescribes in detail how these things should be organized. Our member states also have different setups in this regard, but we look at delivery results and quality. So the fundamentals are really essential because we want to make sure that when new members join, they strengthen the Union, they don't weaken the Union. And the areas that I've just mentioned are really essential in this regard. That's something on which over time we've put increasing emphasis. It's also a feature of deep societal, cultural, if you will, change in countries that join the EU.

[00:10:20.02]

In some cases, take the example of Albania, it meant vetting every single judge and prosecutor and in the process removing more than half of them because they didn't meet the requisite standards. So, you know, this process eventually leads to what we believe a massive improvement in the quality of governance in the broader sense of the word, which is beneficial for the countries even if they weren't joining the EU, they would benefit a lot from it. But it's a precondition for joining the EU as well.

[00:10:56.06] - Nicolas Véron

And now the European Commission continues to monitor that also for the existing member states, right? For the 27 member states, the European Commission produces what every year? A report on the rule of law and corruption and what have you?

[00:11:10.07] - Gert Jan Koopman

That's correct. Yeah, exactly. And you know what, I mean, I won't hide from you that in some member states, there are concerns about backsliding that have occurred in some of the newer member states long after they joined. And obviously what everyone wants is that we avoid that from happening again when we take in new member states. Hence, as I said, the added emphasis on rule of law issues, fundamental issues in the accession negotiations.

[00:11:38.28] - Nicolas Véron

In the next few weeks, we'll have elections in both Slovenia and Hungary with a lot at stake in terms of how the government leadership of those two countries will which are of course member states of the European Union now, have been since 2004, as you mentioned, how they will contribute to the EU in general. Is the result— I know you cannot comment on national politics and election results, but will those kind of elections have an impact on the timetable of enlargement?

[00:12:11.11] - Gert Jan Koopman

They could well. I mean, the country— I'm not revealing any secrets— the country where this is really most relevant is Ukraine, which, which, you know, is at the moment not advancing formally as much as one would hope, because we have assessed, we in the Commission have assessed that they meet the criteria for a number of very important steps. But Hungary is essentially withholding its agreement to formalizing those steps because Hungary has come out saying that It feels that Ukraine should not be an EU member state after the 27 member states, including Hungary, 2 years ago decided that, you know, in principle, it could be a member state. So, you know, the elections—

[00:12:56.12] - Nicolas Véron

Including Hungary with the same government, right?

[00:12:59.25] - Gert Jan Koopman

With the same government, yeah, exactly. So, you know, these elections are important from that perspective for Hungary, but obviously, in the real world, we don't just look at these countries in isolation. The whole process, of course, is being looked at in the round by our member states. And for example, the fact that Hungary is holding up progress with Ukraine has led some other member states to say, well, in that case, we can't formalize matters for Moldova because

Moldova and Ukraine started at the same point in time after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. And therefore, there's a group of member states, the Baltics, who feel it would be very unfair on Ukraine if, you know, just because of Hungary's opposition, they got blocked and Moldova was moving forward formally. Now we found a workaround in terms of moving forward with preparations. We call that frontloading. So the technical work, actually the substantive work happens anyway, but we can't formalize it. That's a good illustration of how national politics, domestic politics in EU member states affects the accession process.

[00:14:07.11] - Nicolas Véron

I'd like to come back to the ratification process. So as you mentioned, ratification procedures are different in every member state. You mentioned that France needs a parliamentary supermajority or a referendum. Are there any countries where there is necessarily a referendum, or it's at most optional in every current member state for ratification?

[00:14:30.13] - Gert Jan Koopman

Yeah, it's at most optional. I think the French have the string— the, the stringest, uh, the most stringent, sorry, uh, constraints in this regard. But, you know, in the past there have been governments that decided, given the importance of these decisions, to organize referenda. So you cannot be 100% sure that it would only be France. More generally, it is really extremely interesting to see that, you know, this debate about EU membership of new countries is really something that is seen as a challenge in some of our member states. However, our own polling suggests that in reality 56% of the European population would welcome new members joining, provided of course they meet the conditions, the criteria. But there is a lot of variation, as you probably also know, across member states.. And France is a member state where our polling suggests there are very large numbers of undecided and skeptical voters. So, you know, engagement, outreach, debate is very important. Taking out safeguards, introducing safeguards, taking out insurance against some of the issues that people are worried about will also be very important. So the internal EU27 dimension of this whole process is also of crucial importance to its eventual success.

[00:16:02.22] - Nicolas Véron

Question from one of the audience on the mechanisms on backsliding. Obviously there's a big barrier to entry, so you need to come clean to become a member, but how can the Commission or the European Union more generally have mechanisms with teeth that could prevent backsliding once a country has been allowed in?

[00:16:27.26] - Gert Jan Koopman

Ja, that's a very good question. In fact, we have so-called safeguards in the accession treaties that allow action to be taken if there are issues subsequently. Now, what we are contemplating is to strengthen those safeguards pretty significantly so that we have more grip on a potential situation where things go wrong. And this could be spanning quite a, a wide range of, of issues, from money to decision-making powers to access to markets, depending on the severity of the breaches that we might see. So this would be negotiated as part of accession itself, these safeguard measures.

[00:17:14.08] - Nicolas Véron

But these measures would apply only to the new members, not to the old members, right? So that means that there would be more checks on backsliding in, say, Albania than in Hungary, or just to take those two examples.

[00:17:27.26] - Gert Jan Koopman

Yeah, well, we have a baseline for all, all EU-27 member states. So one of the things that we did a few years ago when I was still in my previous capacity in DG Budget is to introduce this conditionality mechanism. That makes it possible for the member states, the Council, to withhold or suspend financing in case there are severe breaches of the rule of law in a member state. And actually that's been activated in respect of Hungary. That's the baseline. But obviously, you know, with a new member state who necessarily doesn't have quite the same track record as older member states, you may want to have stronger safeguards. So on top of the EU-27 safeguards, there would be a series of safeguards specifically laid down in the accession treaties, which are always between the 27 member states and the new member state, Canada's country presently, that would govern that particular relationship. Yeah.

[00:18:23.25] - Nicolas Véron

So let me go a little bit, because that's implicit in our topic, right into the kind of country-by-country considerations. Montenegro and Albania are relatively small countries. They're mostly at peace with their neighbors. There's occasional little friction here and there, but nothing particularly dramatic. Now, if you think of Moldova, it is more dramatic. There's a whole region of Moldova, Transnistria, which is essentially administered by Russia through a local proxy. There's another region, Gagauzia, which is a bit of a variation of that. So none of those regions are the majority of the country, but they're not negligible. How is that interfering with the accession process?

[00:19:11.29] - Gert Jan Koopman

Well, these issues of, if you will, internal coherence are dealt with in parallel but separate from the enlargement process.. And, you know, if we want to go to the case of Cyprus, you've seen that in theory it's possible to take in a member state that, you know, has a territory which is disputed by a third country. So, you know, there are ways of handling this, but obviously it will be desirable if these situations could be addressed in parallel more fundamentally. So that is something which the countries themselves are looking at, and we would be assisting them. But it's not a showstopper for accession because it's essentially a separate issue that can also be regulated in the accession treaty if it remains unresolved.

[00:20:06.08] - Nicolas Véron

Yeah, I'm not sure I know this. Is Northern Cyprus at this point legally part of the EU? How has that been determined?

[00:20:16.08] - Gert Jan Koopman

Yeah, well, so Cyprus, you know, we consider the island of Cyprus as Cyprus, right? And, you know, part of the territory is contested. If we go back even much further in history, you know, West Germany and East Germany are good examples. When, you know, reunification happened— Say again?

[00:20:42.20] - Nicolas Véron

That one was fixed.

[00:20:43.28] - Gert Jan Koopman

That one was fixed, exactly. So, you know, I don't want to go into the institutional complexities, and they are very, very complex indeed, but I think the fundamental point is that these issues can be addressed, that obviously the more we address them before the country joins, the easier accession is. It's not particularly easy on the line in Cyprus, But fundamentally, the process can be made to work regardless.

[00:21:14.15] - Nicolas Véron

Another point, and I think it wasn't clear to me before this session but now it is, is that there is a plausible scenario in which the Republic of Moldova becomes an EU member state without any change in the status quo in Transnistria and Gagauzia, correct?

[00:21:31.08] - Gert Jan Koopman

Yeah, I think Gagauzia has a little bit of a different issue. They don't have a a separate government. It's, you know, it's still under the control of the central government, the Right Bank as it is called. Transnistria is a little bit of a different issue. But yeah, I mean, it is possible that the country would join without the Transnistrian issue having been resolved. Not fantastic, but possible.

[00:22:00.17] - Nicolas Véron

So we have a question from Klaas Knot, and unless that's a namesake, I assume it's the former governor of the Dutch central bank, who's asking you about this idea of, you know, is it still a zero-one process or are there intermediate forms of membership? There were many reports of a discussion recently in Brussels about that. Can you give us a sense of that debate, which has been widely reported in the media?

[00:22:27.15] - Gert Jan Koopman

Yeah, no, it's high class. Good to know that you're on the show. So I think there are two separate issues. One is that we have decided increasingly to allow candidate countries that are ready to participate in individual building blocks of the EU to do so, provided they meet the relevant criteria. Good example is the Single Euro Payment Area, something Klaas Knot knows well. Where, you know, a large part of the EU Aki needs to be on the statute books. I use jargon. Aki means rulebook. So the relevant rules for payments between euro area countries and non-euro area countries would need to be complied with. But provided they do that, they could actually participate. And that leads to a huge reduction in the costs of transfers. Another example is roaming, where, you know, we have a a Roam as at Home, as it is called, system in the EU where basically roaming charges are identical across borders within the EU.

[00:23:34.13] - Nicolas Véron

Now, provided for telephone, for phone roaming, right?

[00:23:39.24] - Gert Jan Koopman

Absolutely. And that's very important for ordinary citizens, businesses. And here, Ukraine and Moldova, for example, they have aligned with this legislation and we have integrated them in the Roma's at Home area already before membership. So one strand of work we call this gradual integration is to integrate them in areas where they're ready. Now, the debate that is also taking place is whether the transitional periods which countries typically get when they join, you know, how far you could go with that. We all know that when a country joins, there's an obligation to join Economic and Monetary Union, but, you know, they're not going to be ready from the moment they join, so there's a transition period. Another example is Schengen. Not all EU member states are in Schengen, and not all EU member states— and none of the member states that joined immediately would immediately be in Schengen unless they're already in Schengen.

[00:24:37.19] - Nicolas Véron

Of course, there's a system by which you can cross borders inside the EU without having to, you know, pass a checkpoint or something.

[00:24:45.05] - Gert Jan Koopman

Correct. Yeah, it's visa-free, no checks. So, you know, this is regulated through a transition period where, yes, they're members, but they're not yet participating in this particular area because they're not yet ready. In the case of Schengen, so this travel across borders, there are issues of security, you know, are there enough checks, is the police sufficiently up to speed to deal with criminality, this sort of stuff where where, you know, checks and balances will have to be demonstrated separately and probably a little bit after membership. So in reality, this debate is centered a bit around how much can we do before they join, gradual integration, and how much can we do after they join, how much can we wait doing after they join by having longer transition periods. Obviously, if you have many transition periods, you could join earlier, And there we will need to find a balance. There is only one form of membership. We don't believe that, you know, the treaties, our foundational legal act, allows for different types of membership. That is not foreseen. But obviously, if there is a lot of gradual integration before you join, you're not a formal member, but you're actually very close to the club.

[00:26:02.23]

And if there's lots of transition periods, you are a member, but you don't participate in everything yet. So You know, I think that's where the debate is right now, and that's important because it could speed up alignment and anchoring on the EU. And secondly, especially for gradual integration, it synchronizes the benefits of anchoring on the EU with the political costs of reforms, because we all know that reforms are difficult. The political economy of reforms is very difficult. We are very integrated. So if you want to become an EU member state, there's a very high political cost of aligning with our rules. And if the benefits are deferred very much, this desynchronization can actually make it harder to move forward rapidly on the EU accession path. So that's also a relevant factor in this debate.

[00:26:57.11] - Nicolas Véron

You said there's only one form of membership, you're either in or out. There were a lot of reports in the last few weeks until that dinner or meeting in Brussels, uh, that weren't that clear, right? So was that just members of the press corps who were confused, or was there an actual debate about this proposition that has now been closed?

[00:27:18.23] - Gert Jan Koopman

Well, I, as I was saying, I think the idea that, that is being debated and was debated is that, you know, you could join with many, many transitional periods. So you join very soon even if you're not yet fully ready to participate in all of the areas, and then you get many transition periods. I think there's not a lot of enthusiasm for that idea in many quarters because, yes, it would allow speed to be picked up, but, you know, then there's still a lot of work to be done by these countries as member states later, and that also poses a challenge. So that's where the debate was, and that debate will continue. It's not black and white. We've always had transition periods. Freedom of movement, the possibility for workers to work in other countries, is a classic example where, you know, the famous Polish plumber, so the Polish plumber that was feared so much back in the day in the early 2000s, would come and move from Poland to France, the Netherlands, the UK, and destroy local employment. Benefiting from these freedoms. And countries then negotiated transition periods where there were limits placed on the freedom of providing these services.

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So it's not a completely new debate. It's a very sensitive debate because it goes to the heart of how we actually integrate in Europe.

[00:28:43.21] - Nicolas Véron

And for Schengen, am I mistaken that Romania and Bulgaria had to wait between 15 and 20 years to get in, right? Which they are now.

[00:28:54.20] - Gert Jan Koopman

Absolutely. Yeah.

[00:28:56.24] - Nicolas Véron

So Uri Kortjan asked about Montenegro, whether they could join the banking union before joining the EU. Is that a possibility?

[00:29:06.02] - Gert Jan Koopman

I don't think so. I think that doesn't really work. That we have not foreseen. But what they can do and are doing actually, because they have an excellent central bank, is aligning with a lot of the legislation and exchanging a lot of the information. So materially, substantially, they're already very aligned, but they're not part of the banking union.

[00:29:26.00] - Nicolas Véron

We have a question about Turkey. Turkey has been a candidate since I don't remember when, more than 50 years, I guess. What's the situation and how is the geopolitical turmoil in their southeastern fringe affecting that? Can you give us an update?

[00:29:45.08] - Gert Jan Koopman

Yeah, no, that's a very good question. So, so Turkey basically, um, has been, has been a candidate country for a long time, but back in 2018, on account of, um, a significantly, a significant slacking in the reform drive in Türkiye, uh, it was decided by the European Council that the negotiations would be suspended. So they were put on ice, and since then, whilst we have a customs union with Turkey, which is a deep form of economic integration, the process of alignment, especially when it comes to those fundamental issues such as rule of law, democracy, and what have you, that process seems to have come to a halt. Also, Turkey has opted to follow a different foreign policy orientation because one of the conditions, of course, for EU member states is that when they join, so candidate countries, when they join the EU, is that they are aligned with our foreign policy statement. So Turkey shares a lot with us in the economic space, but the negotiations have come to a halt. Now, what we are doing in this geopolitical time is building a much more strategic partnership with Turkey. So the collaboration is on the upswing.

[00:31:08.05]

We're working together very closely in the South Caucasus. We are looking at North Africa together. Turkey, of course, sits at the crossroads also to the Middle East. And therefore, as a partner, it's absolutely indispensable. And working together very closely with a partner that is actually to a large extent part of our economic area is something that's in our interest, even if we're not actively pursuing accession negotiations today.

[00:31:35.28] - Nicolas Véron

So you just mentioned the Caucasus, and here's something I never understood. When I look at my geographical definitions, the boundary between Asia and Europe is the Caucasus watershed itself. So, so those countries are in Asia. What makes them different? I know that the Georgian candidacy has been put into the freezer because of the local politics, but what is Is there a fundamental difference from an EU perspective and considering possible enlargement between the South Caucasus and say the Middle East, Lebanon, you know, other countries that are in the periphery? Can you give us a bit of a sense of definitions?

[00:32:17.23] - Gert Jan Koopman

Yeah, so you're asking whether these countries could become candidate countries and eventually members of the EU? Is that what you're sort of—

[00:32:23.28] - Nicolas Véron

I'm asking about Lebanon and I'm asking about the South Caucasus. Caucasus countries, basically. I would like to understand the geography, the definitional issues.

[00:32:34.18] - Gert Jan Koopman

Yeah, so the treaty uses pretty general language, which isn't completely clear-cut, but it talks about European countries, and we interpret this as countries that are part of the European landmass. The Eurasian landmass. So Georgia is a candidate country. Armenia could potentially be a candidate country. I think Lebanon is quite far away.

[00:33:08.21] - Nicolas Véron

Kazakhstan is part of the Eurasian landmass, right? Could they become— geographically they're like Turkey, they have a little bit in Europe and most of the country in Asia. Can they be a candidate?

[00:33:19.16] - Gert Jan Koopman

I think theoretically, yes. Practically, given where these countries are and whether they, you know, given their orientation, the way their societies function, I think at this juncture would not be a realistic prospect. But, you know, we had this debate. Actually, we didn't have this debate. This debate took place more or less spontaneously after the start of the second Trump administration in respect of Canada. Actually, one of the top trending questions on our webpage was, can Canada become an EU member state? So one thing is clear, Canada doesn't sit on the Eurasian landmass, right? So that's not easy.

[00:33:59.22] - Nicolas Véron

Greenland is a neighbor. Could Canada become a member state, seriously?

[00:34:03.24] - Gert Jan Koopman

No. So I think that actually, according to my reading of the treaty, would be very difficult to imagine. But then again, these are ultimately deeply strategic political choices. As I said, the wording in the treaty is relatively open and therefore I'm not sure anyone could exclude any scenario, you know, in the future.

[00:34:28.14] - Nicolas Véron

So let's move to, I guess, the elephant in the room, Ukraine. You mentioned the possibility for Moldova to— Moldova, sorry, to join the EU without a resolution of the Transnistria issue. Is there a possibility of Ukraine joining the issue without a resolution of their issue with Russia?

[00:34:53.24] - Gert Jan Koopman

Well, the question I think is what that means and how we would see from a security standpoint that landscape, a political landscape. So I think it's very hard to imagine any scenario where a country that is engaged in active warfare with the third country would actually join. So, so that is not very, very plausible scenario. But a scenario where, you know, there is a ceasefire that, that has features of structural stability with security guarantees that are sufficiently convincing would not preclude the country from becoming an EU member state. Ultimately, again, these are political choices. Now, What is very important in this particular context, of course, is a treaty article of mutual assistance, Article 42 of our treaty, which actually requires member states to demonstrate solidarity and support other member states that are in trouble. So it's important that we're clear about the landscape going forward for any country that joins. And as I said before, a country that's engaged in active warfare, it's hard to see how we could could take that in, given also this particular article.

[00:36:14.14] - Nicolas Véron

Seems you paying a lot of attention to the US for obvious reasons. In the recent past, there's a Turnberry agreement where— which was viewed as imbalanced, but the generally shared view among analysts that was that the EU had accepted this so-called trade deal for security reasons, including indeed the consideration of the US role in the war between Ukraine and Russia. President Trump has not been particularly enthusiastic about EU enlargement in his pronouncement. I think he opined recently on Iceland, viewing Icelandic joining membership of the EU as a bad idea. How is that going to shape up? I mean, how will the EU have to deploy campaigns on this matter? Can you give us a sense— the title of this session is the geopolitics of enlargement, can you give us a sense of how external interference is dealt with and how the EU is thinking about it?

[00:37:15.28] - Gert Jan Koopman

Yeah, I think when you were referring to President Trump's comments on Iceland, I think he was actually talking about Greenland but misspoke probably. So, but generally speaking, I think you have a point that obviously this is a geopolitical reality that we need to look at. Also because third countries are active in our candidate countries, and the Western Balkans for a long time has been a theater where not just the US but also Turkey and most importantly Russia have been very, very active. So we cannot ignore that dimension. The US typically has been very pro-EU integration, largely from a from a commercial standpoint because this would simply make it easier to trade with the countries. It would enhance the internal market, would provide protections, economic protections. That has evolved a bit with this administration, I think, which, as you can read in their National Security Strategy, takes a more reserved view of the EU for, if you will, cultural reasons, I would say. But we haven't yet seen the US actively opposing EU enlargement of candidate countries. Officially, their position is more neutral, so they're no longer supporting actively like they did in the past. But officially, what they say is they're neutral.

[00:38:40.21]

These are choices of sovereign countries to make with regards to the EU. So for now, this is not my biggest worry at all. I'm more worried about the pernicious influence of Russia, for example, in the Western Balkans and in Ukraine. It invested massive amounts of money, Russia, that is in Moldova, to try to turn the elections. And the elections that took place last year, two sets of elections, were in essence about the European future of the country. It was very clear. And Russia tried to undermine those elections by massive interference and a huge investment that ultimately resulted in very little gain from their perspective, but it required a massive effort on our side to assist the Moldovan government to fight that off.

[00:39:30.19] - Nicolas Véron

You mentioned the Western Balkans again. I realize I didn't go very far into them because we only spoke about Montenegro and Albania. So North Macedonia, of course, has residual conflict with Bulgaria, which has deep historical roots. Kosovo is not recognized by 5 current EU member states. The Bosnian situation is very complicated, and Serbia has a stance that I have given up trying to understand. Can, can you give us a sense of whether there's a realistic prospect for enlargement beyond Albania and Montenegro into Western Balkans, or whether we should consider that, you know, it will never happen. What's the current outlook?

[00:40:19.09] - Gert Jan Koopman

Well, I actually think that what happens in Albania and Montenegro is really very important also for the other countries on the Western Balkans, all of which actually are very clear in reaffirming their European perspective. They do actually underline that they want to become an EU member state. But I think it's also fair to say that in the past, given that the EU itself was not very enthusiastic about enlargement 10 years ago, you know, there was a lot of skepticism in the region about the realism of actually joining. Now, if Albania and Montenegro continue as they are and become member states, I think that has a huge impact. And I already see in conversations with senior leaders in the other four Western Balkan partners, that this has a massive impact. Serbia, of course, is the biggest economy. It's about half of the Western Balkans. And whilst the country has a multi-vector policy, in reality, it is increasingly accelerating work to move forward on its European path. It will have to make very difficult choices in this regard, and it finds it very difficult to make those difficult choices. But ultimately, I think there's every prospect that they might do this.

[00:41:39.02]

Sooner rather than later. They've also experienced something Moldova experienced, namely energy blackmail by Russia, and that's gone down very badly. You know, that really puts the national sovereignty at risk. So I am hopeful that Serbia will also start accelerating its accession path. North Macedonia has a particular issue. It needs to undertake some painful reforms that are related, inter alia, with discussions that took place a few years back related also to Bulgarian minorities. It hasn't made those choices yet, but I think if the other two move forward, then this would also, in my view, accelerate the process in this country. Don't forget that North Macedonia used to be ahead of all the other 5 countries for a long time. 4 years ago, it was at the same level as Albania. Now Albania will be moving forward so fast that I think this is actually also realistic. That leaves 2 countries which are in a more difficult AOB. Bosnia-Herzegovina is a very complicated country. I, there's no time now to go into all of the detail. There are very serious governance issues that make it very difficult for the country to move forward. Kosovo is not recognized by a number of our member states, as you rightly said, but it is a country that has modernized quite a bit and has actually submitted a membership bid.

[00:43:13.28]

So I believe that after a period where effectively there was no government on account of— no government on account of election processes, we hopefully will now this year see them getting back on track. And if they're back on track, then I would also hope that we find a way forward with all of our member states to start looking seriously at their candidature. So, you know, I'm a born optimist, civil servants are paid to be optimists, and as you hear me saying, I don't think we can afford the luxury of giving up on the other Western Balkan partners. I think it would be a strategic mistake for the EU, but obviously the countries themselves want it, need to make the reforms, and need to move forward.

[00:43:55.16] - Nicolas Véron

Question from the audience, which will be unfortunately the last for this question because we're close to our limit. But what about the UK? How will re-enlargement to the UK look like? Should the UK make that choice, which of course is in their remit, will it be a smooth process? Will it be a complicated process? How do you think about it?

[00:44:18.23] - Gert Jan Koopman

Well, it's a, it's a very interesting question. Obviously, that's a choice that only the UK can make. The UK is still very aligned from a regulatory standpoint, having been a member state until very recently. And certainly we see some, some positive movements when it comes to energy, for example, when it comes to our big research program Horizon. We know the politics in the UK isn't easy, so the government hasn't opted for more ambitious steps yet, I would say. But I do believe that the geopolitical world we live in today is one where this issue is more relevant than it has been for a long time, certainly since Brexit happened. We are still in many respects very aligned, not just economically but also culturally, in terms of fighting for democracy. The UK and the EU countries, member states, work together very closely in Ukraine in the Coalition of the Willing. So having spent 10 years of my career working for a British commissioner, knowing what the UK can bring to the EU, I'm hopeful that things will evolve in the right direction in the not too distant future.

[00:45:40.26] - Nicolas Véron

That uplifting note, thank you so much, Gertjan Koopman, for illuminating comments on enlargement. Also many thanks to Gina, well done. To Jessica Parrada and to the entire teams on meetings and communications at the Peterson Institute. Thank you very much again to the audience for engagement and see you very soon again at the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

[00:46:03.09] - Gert Jan Koopman

Thank you very much, Nicolas. Take care.