

# Intersecting Paths: Strategic Autonomy, Enlargement, and the Future of EU-Western Balkans Relations

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# Impressum

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# Introduction

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The paper explores the evolution of a more strategic European Union (EU), with a particular focus on how this shift is understood and perceived both within key EU member states and in the Western Balkan countries. The objective is to help to better understand the differing national perspectives on what strategic EU action entails, particularly in the context of key EU member states such as France, Italy, Poland, and Germany, the latter being highlighted as especially influential in regard to the EU enlargement process.

This analysis takes on heightened urgency in the context of external geopolitical pressures, particularly the potential implications of Donald Trump's reelection as President of the United States. A second Trump administration could fundamentally alter the transatlantic relationship, with risks ranging from a diminished U.S. commitment to European security to a swift U.S.-Russia agreement to end the war in Ukraine, undermining European and Ukrainian interests. Concurrently, Trump's hard-line stance on China could escalate U.S.-China trade tensions, leaving Europe vulnerable to economic and strategic disruptions. While the EU previously demonstrated its ability to counter Trump's trade policies, its foreign and security mechanisms remain ill-suited to manage such challenges. These dynamics underline the necessity of enhancing EU strategic autonomy to safeguard its interests in an increasingly volatile global landscape.

Against this backdrop, the paper posits that the expectations for a strategic EU—one that can act cohesively and assertively on the global stage—will differ among key member states due to their unique national priorities, geopolitical positions, and historical contexts. These differences will likely shape the EU's approach to external relations, including its policy towards the Western Balkans, a region with a complex and ongoing accession process to the EU.

In addition to examining the internal dynamics within the EU, the study extends its focus to the perceptions of the Western Balkans vis-à-vis the EU strategic autonomy. By mapping

how the region understands and responds to the evolving strategic ambitions of the EU and its member states, the paper provides insights into the diverse responses from the Western Balkan countries to the evolving security challenges and geopolitical positioning. This is particularly important for their future accession prospects and for fostering a mutual perception of the EU as an autonomous and influential actor on the international stage.

Overall, it is important to underscore the significance of understanding the diverse national approaches to EU strategic autonomy in the Union and within those in the Western Balkans for the long-term objective of building a more resilient and geopolitically coherent European continent.

# EU Perspective(s) on Strategic Autonomy

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The concept of European strategic autonomy has sparked vigorous debate, reflecting the European Union's (EU) struggle to define its role in an increasingly unstable global order. At its core, strategic autonomy refers to the idea that Europeans should govern themselves according to their own rules and safeguard their interests independently, without external interference or support.<sup>1</sup> However, due to the EU's collaborative character, reliance on consensus-driven decisions, and significant economic interdependence with the global community, its external actions must be carefully calibrated. These actions should be multilateral whenever feasible, but unilateral when circumstances demand it.<sup>2</sup>

The discussion on European strategic autonomy has gained momentum due to crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war in Ukraine. These events exposed Europe's dependencies and vulnerabilities in trade, energy and defence, intensifying debates about its reliance on external actors, particularly the United States, Russia and China. While NATO remains the cornerstone of European defence, the EU has sought to complement rather than duplicate its efforts, aiming to strengthen its defence industry and reduce dependence on third countries' technology and raw materials.

Diverging national perspectives shape the EU's approach to strategic autonomy. France has long championed the idea, with President Emmanuel Macron calling for a robust European defence capability to address shifting U.S. priorities towards the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> European Parliament, "EU Strategic Autonomy 2013-2023: from Concept to Capacity", Briefing: EU Strategic Autonomy Monitor, 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733589/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)733589\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733589/EPRS_BRI(2022)733589_EN.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Tocci, Nathalie, "European Strategic Autonomy, European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It", Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2021, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/european-strategic-autonomy-what-it-why-we-need-it-how-achieve-it>

<sup>3</sup> Elysee, "President Macron gives Speech on New Initiative for Europe", 26.11.2017, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/president-macron-gives-speech-on-new-initiative-for-europe>

Macron's recent recognition of NATO's centrality in collective defence reflects a pragmatic adjustment, balancing the need for a strong Europe with transatlantic cohesion.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this moderation, Paris continues to prioritize the development of a robust European defence industry to reduce reliance on American military technology. Macron's approach reflects a nuanced strategy: strengthening Europe's defence posture while maintaining complementarity with NATO. This dual focus aims to reassure Central and Eastern European allies like Poland, which have historically viewed French ambitions with scepticism, and to foster a more integrated and resilient Europe.

Germany's position on strategic autonomy is more cautious and pragmatic. Chancellor Olaf Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech<sup>5</sup> in February 2022 signalled a significant shift in German foreign and defence policy, with the establishment of a €100 billion defence fund and proposals for initiatives such as a European air defence system and a Rapid Reaction Force. Scholz has also advocated for institutional reforms within the EU, including a Defence Ministers' Council and majority voting in foreign policy decisions, to prepare for new EU enlargements. Despite these steps, Germany's approach reflects its preference for consensus-driven leadership rather than unilateral initiatives. Scholz's vision for European defence emphasizes complementarity with NATO rather than outright independence, aligning with Germany's historic reliance on transatlantic security guarantees.

Poland, NATO's easternmost member, prioritizes its transatlantic ties, viewing U.S. support as essential against Russian aggression. Warsaw has consistently advocated for an increased American military presence in Europe and prioritizes purchasing U.S. military equipment, reflecting its scepticism toward visions of strategic autonomy that might dilute NATO's central role. At the same time, Poland supports EU enlargement to include Ukraine and other Eastern neighbours, highlighting its commitment to a

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<sup>4</sup> Ambassade de France en Islande, "Slovakia – GLOBSEC summit in Bratislava – Closing speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic", Bratislava, 31 May 2023, <https://is.ambafrance.org/Slovakia-GLOBSEC-summit-in-Bratislava-Closing-speech-by-M-Emmanuel-Macron>

<sup>5</sup> Bundesregierung, "Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag", 27 February 2022 in Berlin, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>



“Europe of strong nation-states” that enhances collective defence without undermining transatlantic cohesion.<sup>6</sup>

Italy, on the other hand, emphasizes economic resilience as a key dimension of strategic autonomy. Recent reports by former Italian Prime Ministers Mario Draghi<sup>7</sup> and Enrico Letta,<sup>8</sup> in particular, have advocated for reforms to bolster the EU’s competitiveness and reduce dependencies in areas like energy and technology. Such approaches tie the concept of autonomy to strengthening the single market, which it views as foundational to ensuring Europe’s self-sufficiency and prosperity. While Italy aligns with broader EU goals to reduce external dependencies, its focus on economic and technological dimensions offers a pragmatic perspective, seeking to address structural weaknesses without undermining its partnerships within NATO or the EU.

The re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States would likely introduce significant unpredictability into transatlantic dynamics, challenging the EU’s ability to maintain internal cohesion and a unified strategic approach. France might intensify its calls for greater European strategic autonomy, interpreting Trump’s erratic policies as further evidence of the need to reduce reliance on U.S. security guarantees. Germany, while remaining committed to transatlantic cooperation, could find itself under growing pressure to balance its pragmatic, consensus-driven approach with the necessity for a stronger European defence posture. Poland might deepen its focus on bilateral ties with Washington, prioritizing its reliance on U.S. security guarantees against Russian aggression and potentially resisting EU initiatives perceived as diluting NATO’s centrality.

At the same time, the escalating U.S.-China tensions likely to arise under Trump’s leadership would amplify the importance of the economic component of strategic autonomy for the EU. Efforts to reduce dependencies in trade, technology, and energy would necessitate

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<sup>6</sup> Sus, Monika, “Poland’s (Lack of) Vision for Europe”, Carnegie Endowment, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2023/03/polands-lack-of-vision-for-europe?lang=en>

<sup>7</sup> European Commission, “EU Competitiveness: Looking Ahead”, 2024, [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead_en)

<sup>8</sup> Letta, Enrico, “Much More than a Market: Speed, Security, Solidarity”, Council of the European Union, 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf>

revisiting the EU's internal rules, particularly competition policies, to enable a stronger industrial strategy and greater pooling of resources across member states. Such changes could include coordinated investments in key sectors like green energy, semiconductors, and defence technologies, aimed at fostering resilience and self-sufficiency. However, these shifts would likely encounter significant resistance from some member states, particularly those wary of greater market intervention or a more centralized industrial policy or relying on common EU debt. These tensions could complicate efforts to align national strategies with the broader objective of achieving EU-wide strategic autonomy, further exposing the Union to fragmentation and external vulnerabilities.

Against this backdrop, the debate around EU enlargement adds further complexity but also presents an opportunity for collaboration with candidate countries while clarifying EU *finalité*. Enlargement is viewed as a strategic necessity for ensuring stability, yet it introduces challenges related to EU cohesion, decision-making, and resource distribution.<sup>9</sup> Integrating new members requires institutional reforms that balance national sovereignty with collective responsibility. At the same time, it provides the opportunity to candidate states to proactively demonstrate their potential to contribute to the EU's geo-economic and geopolitical security. In particular, for the Western Balkans this could mean a shift from being “consumers” of European security to becoming “net contributors” would bolster the case for their integration.

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<sup>9</sup> Bonomi, Matteo and Mastroiocco, Raffaele, “Reforming by Hope, Will or Necessity? EU Integration in Times of Enlargement”, Istituto Affari Internazionali, 2024, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/reforming-hope-will-or-necessity>

# Western Balkan Perspective on Strategic Autonomy

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One key component of the EU's strategic autonomy is its ability to effectively manage external opportunities and constraints that derive from its relations with third countries. This is especially important in its immediate southeastern neighbourhood, which still holds the potential for destabilization and has been raising concerns over its security, stability and democratic resilience. Especially when confronted with the new geopolitical reality of the war in Ukraine, the Western Balkans as a region which is completely surrounded by EU member state territories, could represent a serious external constraint for EU's strategic autonomy as it is increasingly viewed as a hub for malign foreign influences from EU's geostrategic competitors whose goal has been to disrupt EU's influence in the region through attempts to derail the Euro-Atlantic orientation of the WB countries.

The importance of the Western Balkans for EU's strategic autonomy has been recognized by the EU which in its Strategic Compass for Security and Defence has emphasized the significance of strengthening EU's cooperation with the Western Balkans through proposals to develop tailored partnerships in the Western Balkans and strategies to improve "the resilience of societies and democratic processes, political institutions and critical infrastructure in the Western Balkans, as well as boosting cybersecurity, countering disinformation and supporting counter-terrorism efforts in the region".<sup>10</sup> In this sense, strengthening civilian and military capacity and cooperation with the Western Balkan partners in CSDP operations has been pinpointed as high priority.

However, these goals might prove somewhat challenging, having in mind the current Western Balkan divergent security landscape. On one hand, the Western Balkans is the

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<sup>10</sup> European External Action Service, "A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence", 2022, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic\\_compass\\_en3\\_web.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf)

region where the EU has had the longest and most effective leverage and influence in democracy promotion and stabilization. If there is one uniting idea among all Western Balkan countries (also in the context of strategic autonomy), that would be their aspiration to become EU members. The Western Balkan countries share a general perspective on EU accession as a catalyst for economic growth and institutional reform. All countries are formally engaged in EU's enlargement policy as candidates or potential candidates for membership. On the other hand, there is a significant divergence in the political views and the course of foreign policy regarding the frameworks of collective security and the geopolitical positioning in the confrontation between the collective West and its geopolitical rivals.

For some WB countries, like North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo, Euro-Atlantic integration has been continuously perceived as a key factor of stability and security. Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia are already members of NATO which have successfully recalibrated their defensive capabilities in the wake of the changing security landscape invoked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. All three countries have met the 2% defence expenditure threshold in 2024<sup>11</sup> and have provided military support for Ukraine through donations of military equipment. For example, North Macedonia has sent Ukraine some 30 T 72 tanks, 12 Mi 24 attack helicopters and 4 Su 25 ground attack jets as well as offered military bases on its own soil and has successfully trained Ukrainian soldiers.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast, Serbia's long-standing relations with Russia and President Vucic's engagement with other global powers, such as China, Turkey, and the Gulf states, reflect a multifaceted foreign policy approach that sometimes challenges the EU's efforts to promote regional stability. Since the inception, Serbia's positioning towards the ramifications of the Ukrainian conflict has been in a state of flux. On one hand, Serbia has voted in favour of several UN resolutions that have been condemning Russia's actions against Ukraine.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> NATO, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries", Press Release, 2024, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Defence%20Expenditure%20of%20NATO%20Countries%202014-2024&utm\\_content=Defence%20Expenditure%20of%20NATO%20Countries%202014-2024&utm\\_term=Download%20the%20full%20document%20in%20PDF](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2024/6/pdf/240617-def-exp-2024-en.pdf?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Defence%20Expenditure%20of%20NATO%20Countries%202014-2024&utm_content=Defence%20Expenditure%20of%20NATO%20Countries%202014-2024&utm_term=Download%20the%20full%20document%20in%20PDF)

<sup>12</sup> Marusic, Sinisa, "North Macedonia Completes Training First Batch of Ukrainian Soldiers", Balkan Insight, 22.11.2023, <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/11/22/north-macedonia-completes-training-first-batch-of-ukrainian-soldiers/>

<sup>13</sup> Stojanovic, Milica, "Serbia Backs UN Resolution Against Russian Annexations in Ukraine", Balkan Insight, 13.0.2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/13/serbia-backs-un-resolution-against-russian-annexations-in-ukraine/>

Recently, there has been a certain U-turn away from Russia in Serbia's procurement of military equipment, when President Vucic inked a 2,7 billion euro deal during French President Macron's visit to Belgrade for the purchase of French Rafale fighter jets.<sup>14</sup> In addition, a recent report from the Financial Times revealed that Serbia via third parties has exported ammunition to Ukraine in the excess of 800 million euros.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, Serbia has resisted adopting sanctions against Russia, balancing its traditional relationship with Moscow against growing pressure from the EU. Unlike the remaining WB countries who have gradually reached full alignment with EU's CFSP positions and declarations which include the restrictive measures against Russia, Serbia has managed a rate of 51% of alignment in 2024, which is less than in 2023. To date, Serbia has not aligned with the restrictive measures against Russia as well as with the majority of the statements of the High Representative related to Russia and Ukraine, but also the restrictive measures against China, Belarus, Iran, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Venezuela.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Serbia has continued to build its partnership with China, being the most active WB country in China's Belt and Road initiative by signing 18 agreements in 2023 and accounting for over 30 percent of FDI inflows for 2022 and 2023.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the biggest potential for destabilisation of the Western Balkan region lies in the relations between Serbia and Kosovo. The EU-facilitated Dialogue on normalisation of relations between Belgrade and Pristina has been progressing at a very slow pace, marred by continuous incidents of escalation of violence in the North of Kosovo and deployments of Serbian army units along the border with Kosovo.

Confronted with these developments, by far the biggest strategic asset that the EU has for consolidation of stability in southeast Europe that could also serve as a sustainable anchor of strategic autonomy is its credible enlargement policy. The WB countries have

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<sup>14</sup> Vasovic, Aleksandar, "Serbia buys 12 Rafale Jets from France's Dassault Aviation for 2.7 Billion Euros", Reuters, 29.8.2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/frances-macron-visits-serbia-boost-eu-ties-discuss-rafale-deal-2024-08-29/>

<sup>15</sup> Russel, Alec and Dunai, Marton, "Serbia Turns Blind Eye to its Ammunition Ending Up in Ukraine, Financial Times, 22.6.2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/136ed721-fd50-4815-8314-d9df8dc67fd6>

<sup>16</sup> European Commission, "Serbia 2024 Report", SWD(2024) 695 final, 2024, [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902\\_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?filename=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Wiiw FDI Database, <http://wiiw.ac.at/annual-database.html>

been engaged in the EU accession process since the early 2000s. Despite this longstanding presence in the region, EU enlargement policy has not been able to produce tangible results. Enlargement fatigue, disinterest among some member states and the lack of genuine political will on EU level to support the process have significantly reduced the credibility of the process, which has decreased the motivation for reforms among the domestic elites. This has consequently opened the door for external malign influences from authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China.

The conflict in Ukraine should have been a turning point for EU enlargement as a factor of strategic autonomy. The war raised the alarm about the return of the geopolitical significance of EU enlargement and the urgent need of recalibration of Euro-Atlantic interests in eastern and southeastern Europe. In a formal sense, this geopolitical turn has revitalised the EU's enthusiasm on enlargement, but not sufficiently to change things on the ground. Since the start of the war four countries i.e. the Association trio of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia plus Bosnia and Herzegovina have been promoted as candidate countries and except Georgia the European Council has reached a decision to open accession negotiations (conditioned in the case of Bosnia). In addition, North Macedonia has finished the screening process of the accession negotiations, Albania has opened the first negotiating cluster and Montenegro has fulfilled the intermediate benchmarks paving the way to start closing negotiation chapters.

However, despite these achievements, one can argue that the process is still progressing at a disappointingly slow pace, especially having in mind the urgency for a geopolitical response aimed at consolidation of the region. This has been accommodated by the lack of a unified approach on the accession process within the EU, a reflection of the significant differences between the member states regarding EU enlargement. In spite of the necessity for a more homogenous strategic thinking, some member states continue to facilitate the unanimity principle in decision-making on enlargement policy to impose blockades of the accession paths of their WB neighbours. This has prompted some EU member states to push for reform of decision-making on enlargement. For example, a recent non-paper prepared by Germany and Slovenia proposed a model of qualified majority voting (QMV) for the opening of the negotiating clusters and chapters.<sup>18</sup> As the possibility of introducing

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<sup>18</sup> Government of Republic of Slovenia, "Minister Fajon: 'We will Strengthen the Slovenian-German Strategic Partnership'", 5.12.2023, <https://www.gov.si/en/news/2023-12-05-minister-fajon-we-will-strengthen-the-slovenian-german-strategic-partnership/>

QMV in the Council on enlargement related affairs gains traction<sup>19</sup> the EU should sort its internal differences and take a political decision to support this change which could be of crucial significance for converting the region into a reliable pro-western and pro-EU ally.

Finally, the Western Balkan outlook on strategic autonomy needs to take into consideration one rather uncertain variable, i.e. the foreign policy course of the upcoming US administration under newly elected president Trump. Nationalist leaders across the Balkans were among the first to congratulate Trump on his victory,<sup>20</sup> while the news of the election outcome empowered nationalist rhetoric in some Western Balkan states.<sup>21</sup> However, the impact of the outcome of the US elections should not be exaggerated. There is a considerable probability that the US foreign policy on the Western Balkans will not change drastically in the wake of the already reduced US interest for maintaining the Euro-Atlantic cooperation and (if one relies on the experiences with the previous Trump presidency) would most probably focus more on quick conflict solving strategies in place of pressures for democratisation.<sup>22</sup> This could further expand EU's role in stabilisation and democracy promotion and provide an opportunity for the EU to strengthen its position as the most important player in the region.

The Western Balkans are expected to focus on economic security amid the re-election of Trump and escalating U.S.-China tensions, aligning with the broader EU objective of strengthening the economic dimension of strategic autonomy. In response to current and emerging geopolitical challenges, the EU has been highly proactive, introducing measures such as the Foreign Subsidies Regulation, FDI Screening Regulation, Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, Anti-Coercion Mechanism, and Critical Raw Materials Act. These initiatives, along with the 2023 Communication on the European Economic Security Strategy issued by the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs, set a framework that Western Balkan countries, as EU candidates, will need to align with.

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<sup>19</sup> Group of Twelve, "Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century", Paris-Berlin, 18.9.2023, [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/20230919\\_group\\_of\\_twelve\\_report\\_updated14.12.2023\\_cle88fb88.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/20230919_group_of_twelve_report_updated14.12.2023_cle88fb88.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> BIRN, "Central and Southeast Europe's Populists Celebrate Trump Win", 6.11.2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/2024/11/06/central-and-southeast-europes-populists-celebrate-trump-win/>

<sup>21</sup> Novinite, "Posters in Belgrade with Trump and Musk Feature North Macedonia on 'Greater Serbia' Map", 12.11.2024, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/229322/Posters+in+Belgrade+with+Trump+and+Musk+Feature+North+Macedonia+on+%22Greater+Serbia%22+Map>

<sup>22</sup> Gjoni, Iliriana, "New Winds From Washington? The Western Balkans at a Crossroad", Carnegie Endowment, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/11/new-winds-from-washington-the-western-balkans-at-a-crossroad?lang=en>

# Conclusion

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The perspectives of EU member states on strategic autonomy reflect their diverse priorities, which shape not only their approaches to defence, economy, and transatlantic relations but also their views on the future of EU enlargement and about the ultimate purpose of the EU integration project. France emphasizes a strong and autonomous Europe capable of global leadership, while Germany advocates a balanced approach that complements NATO and prepares the EU for institutional challenges posed by enlargement. Poland underscores the importance of transatlantic ties, prioritizing U.S. support, yet supports the integration of Ukraine and other Eastern neighbours and Western Balkan countries as part of a broader vision of a secure Europe. Meanwhile, Italy links strategic autonomy to economic resilience and market competitiveness. Enlargement adds further complexity to the debate, with some member states viewing it as essential to consolidating EU influence and fostering stability, while others remain cautious due to institutional and resource constraints. Reconciling these perspectives will be crucial for defining the EU's *finalité* as both an effective global actor and a credible partner vis a vis rising uncertainties coming from Donald Trump's second term.

A strategically autonomous EU would prioritize accelerating the integration of the Western Balkans, currently one of Europe's most critical enclaves. It would also prepare for the eventual accession of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, clarifying the territorial scope of European integration. Bringing the Western Balkans countries into the EU would



mark a significant step toward realizing the EU's finalité. It would signify that European integration has matured into a tangible political entity with defined boundaries on a continental scale. Ultimately, strategic autonomy does not imply severing transatlantic ties, but rather building a Europe capable of acting decisively in a multipolar world. By aligning with NATO's central role, deepening integration, and leveraging enlargement as a geopolitical tool, the EU can strengthen its resilience and uphold its values.

Thus, the region of the Western Balkans remains a critical factor for the EU's strategic autonomy, offering both challenges and opportunities. While countries like North Macedonia, Albania, and Montenegro have demonstrated commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration, Serbia's fluctuating foreign policy and regional tensions remain significant challenges for the stability of the region. To consolidate stability and counter external influences from Russia and China, the EU must revitalize its enlargement policy by fostering greater political unity among member states, accelerating the accession process, and adopting reforms such as qualified majority voting to mitigate the risks of bilateral blockages not related to the Copenhagen criteria. By doing so, the EU can strengthen its influence in the Western Balkans, ensuring the region becomes a reliable pro-EU ally and a pillar of stability in southeastern Europe.

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# Intersecting Paths: Strategic Autonomy, Enlargement, and the Future of EU-Western Balkans Relations

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