

## The Future of EU Enlargement Policy and the 2024 European Parliament elections

### Key points:

- Enlargement of the EU is a top priority for the remainder of the terms of the European Parliament and the European Commission;
- All eyes are on the European Council meeting on 14-15<sup>th</sup> December in Brussels;
- Elections for the European Parliament in 2024 are going to be a pivotal moment in the EU's history

***“Completing our Union is the call of history, it is the natural horizon of the European Union.”***

*Ursula von der Leyen*

The President of the European Commission's statement<sup>1</sup> on November 8<sup>th</sup> regarding the 2023 Enlargement Package has allowed us a glimpse into the European institutions' need for a new and improved approach to enlargement policy – an approach that is vital and urgent for the future of the Union. Russia's war in Ukraine has dramatically shifted the geopolitical situation in Europe, leading to events such as the applications of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia for accession to the EU in 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina being granted candidate status in 2022, Finland and Sweden's applications for NATO membership last year, an increase in military spending by member-states of the EU<sup>2</sup>, and the push for a European Defense Industry Strategy (EDIS).

The Enlargement Package reports have outlined the progress, or lack thereof, of all candidate countries and Georgia, which is yet to be granted an official candidate status, towards meeting the Copenhagen criteria and the Commission's recommendations regarding fundamental

---

<sup>1</sup> Ursula von der Leyen. (2023). *Statement by President von der Leyen on the 2023 Enlargement Package and the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*. Accessed 7 December 2023.

[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_23\\_5641](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_5641)

<sup>2</sup> European Defence Agency. (2023). *Record high European defence spending boosted by procurement of new equipment*. Accessed 7 December 2023. <https://eda.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/2023/11/30/record-high-european-defence-spending-boosted-by-procurement-of-new-equipment>

chapters of the accession process. In the case of Ukraine, Ursula von der Leyen stated<sup>3</sup> that more than 90% of the steps that the Commission recommended last year have been completed, which should merit the opening of accession negotiations by the European Council. Right after that remark, however, she went on to state that the Council should adopt a negotiating framework once Ukraine has completed all of the steps outlined by the Commission, with the Commission obliging to provide a report on progress by March 2024. This ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the concrete next steps and timing of Ukraine's accession to the EU could be the blueprint for a revised enlargement policy in the future, which could allow the candidate countries to start accession negotiations while still implementing key reforms regarding accession criteria. Fast-tracking steps of the accession process under immense pressure and threats to a country's very existence by adopting key reforms in sectors such as de-oligarchization processes and the reforms of the Constitutional Court of Ukraine, which appear to be the biggest hurdles for Ukraine on its road to starting accession talks in regards to the 7 conditions set by the Commission, could lead to ineffective reforms in the judicial system which would neither guarantee the Rule of Law, neither function in the intended state.

The recommendations of the European Commission to open accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova immediately and Bosnia and Herzegovina whenever they meet the set conditions, as well as grant candidate status to Georgia, are on the agenda for the European Council's meeting in Brussels on 14-15<sup>th</sup> December. Unlike candidate countries, who have to comply with rigorous accession criteria, the gate-keeping European Council bases its decision to a large extent on a political level, with a unanimous vote needed between the 27 member-states in order to grant candidate status or open accession negotiations.

As is often the case<sup>4</sup>, Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán has been vocal about his disapproval of Ukraine entering the European Union. With less than a week to go until the European Council decides on the future of enlargement, amongst other topics on the agenda, special attention needs to be paid to the Hungarian PM, who could attempt to leverage his veto power in a case of horse-trading.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ursula von der Leyen. (2023). *Statement by President von der Leyen on the 2023 Enlargement Package and the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans*. Accessed 7 December 2023.

[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement\\_23\\_5641](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_23_5641)

<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Camut. (2023). *Hungary's Orbán rejects talks on Ukraine's EU bid*. Accessed 7 December 2023.

<https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-pm-viktor-orban-rejects-talks-on-ukraine-eu-membership-bid/>

EU leaders also have to address the support and aid to Ukraine, with pressure rising as the United States Congress failed<sup>5</sup> to pass a bill featuring \$61 billions in aid to Ukraine due to demands by the Republican party in another case of horse-trading across the Atlantic.

The Parlemeter 2023 offered great insight into the climate of opinion on topics such as EU enlargement efforts (fig. 1) and voter tendencies (fig. 2) regarding the European Parliament elections set to take place 6-9<sup>th</sup> June 2024.

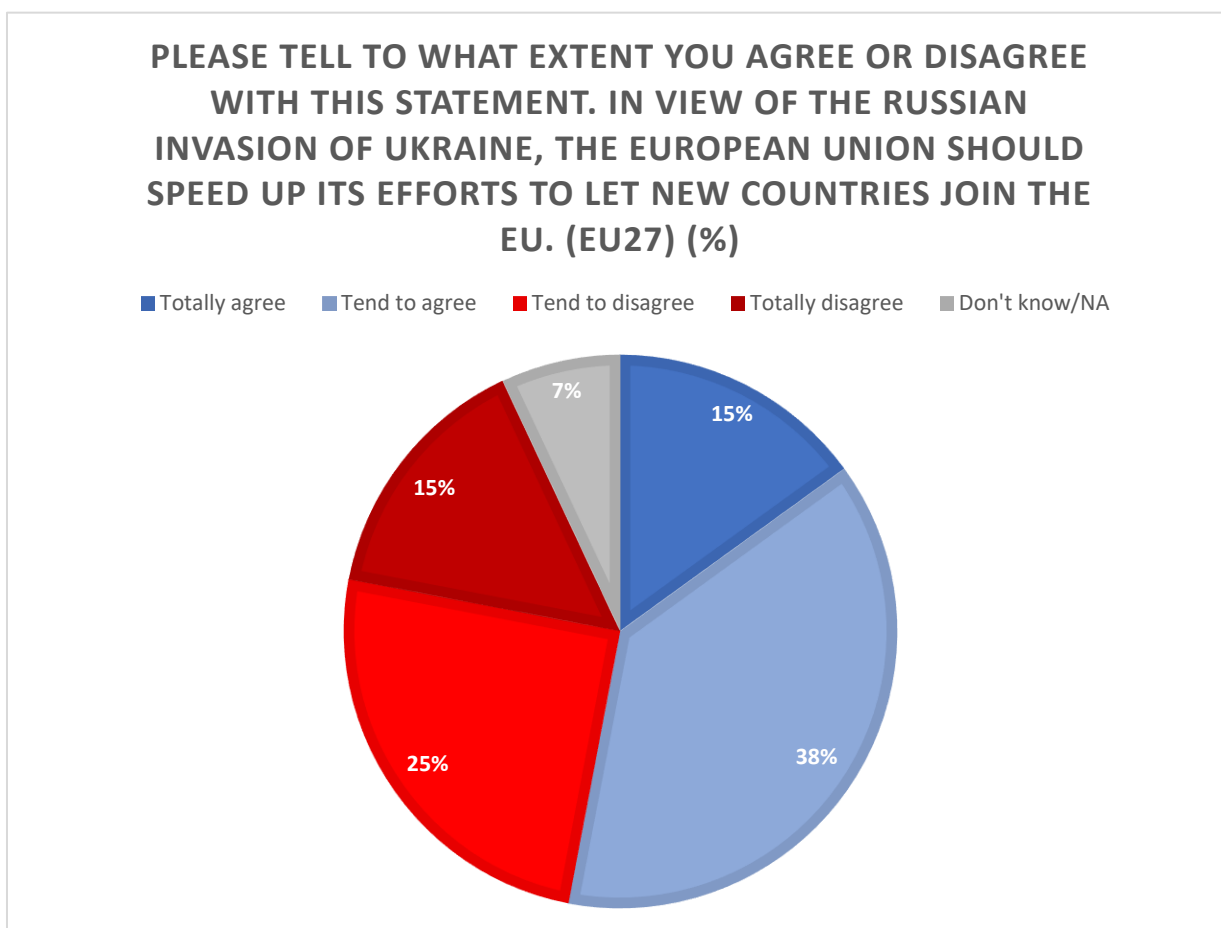
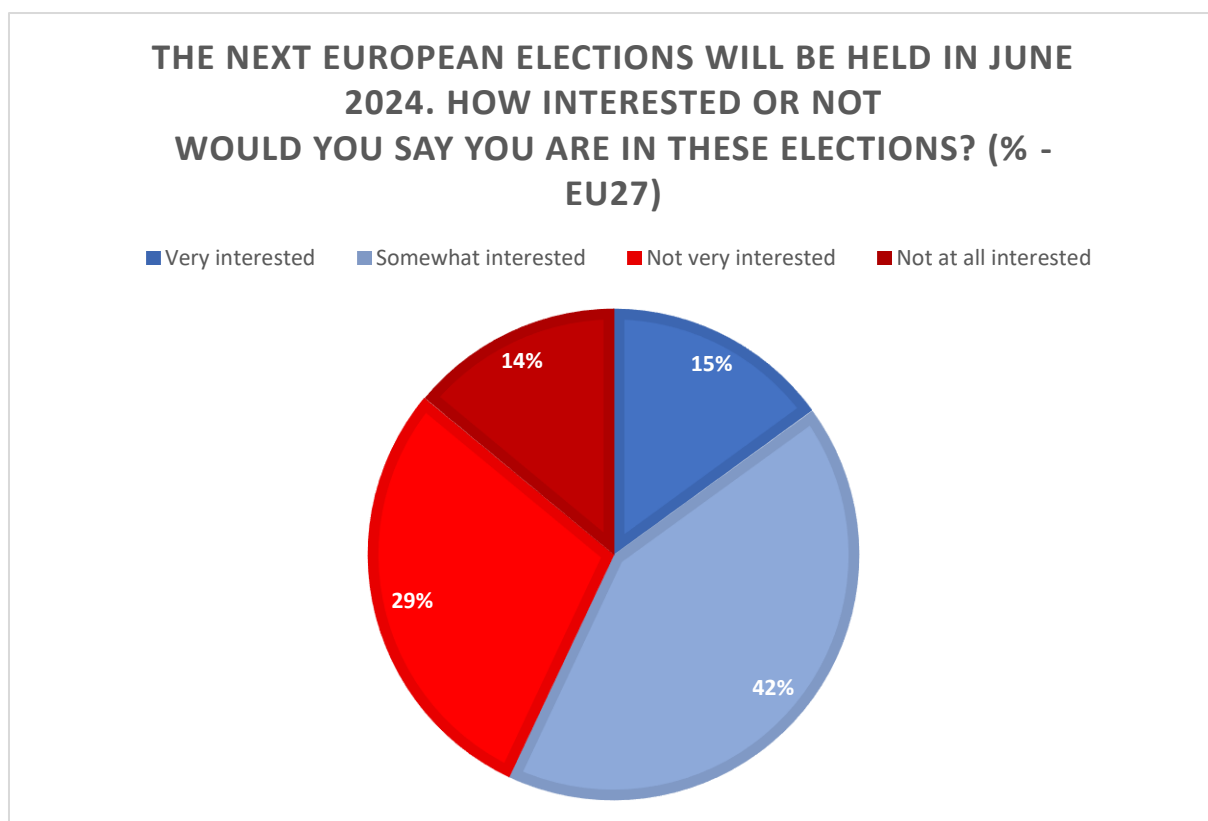


fig.1<sup>6</sup>

The total percentage of people who agree sits at 53% with Lithuania (72%), Spain (68%), Croatia (68%), Ireland (68%), Poland (68%) being the countries with the highest percentage of affirmative responders in contrast to the Czech Republic (37%), Slovakia (40%), Cyprus (41%), which are the 3 countries with the lowest rate of agreement. The survey shows that a majority of the citizens of the EU believe that the processes of enlargement should be optimized.

<sup>5</sup> Bernd Debusmann Jr. (2023). *Ukraine aid from US in doubt after failed Senate vote*. Accessed 7 December 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-67637679>

<sup>6</sup> European Parliament; Verian (producer). (2023). *EP Autumn 2023 Survey: Six months before the 2024 European Elections*. Public Opinion Monitoring Unit within the Directorate General for Communication of the European Parliament. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3152>, 93-94



*fig.2<sup>7</sup>*

The growing role of the European Parliament since the Lisbon Treaty has led to an increase of interest in the elections with 57% of responders expressing their interest, up 6% from a similar survey carried out in September 2018, 8 months before the elections took place in 2019<sup>8</sup>. The countries with the highest proportion of those interested in the elections are the Netherlands (69%), Malta (68%), and Poland (68%), with the least interest responders coming from the Czech Republic (28%), Slovakia (31%), Latvia (38%), Bulgaria (39%).

It is imperative to note that interest in elections does not correlate to voter turnout, however the increase in interest in the election process is a hopeful sign for the recognition of the importance of democracy and the work of the European institutions as a whole.

The European Parliament which will constitute after the 2024 elections will undoubtedly be tasked with heavy decisions on budgeting and foreign aid in particular with the ongoing support of war-torn Ukraine. The next European Commission College will face challenges which are just as crucial, as the momentum and push for enlargement should not be blundered.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 148

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 145