FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

in cooperation with

Friedrich Ebert Stiftung · RennerInstitut · CeSPI · PRO INTERNATIONAL · PROGRESIVA · Kalevi Sorsa Foundation · Olof Palme International Center · Fondation Jean Jaurès · S&D Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists & Democrats in the European Parliament

with the support of

SZOCIÁLIS DEMOKRÁCIÁÉRT INTÉZET · POLITIKATÖRTÉNETI INTÉZET LAPÍTVÁNY

Fourth Progressive Enlargement Conference

2030 and beyond: a progressive agenda for the future of EU enlargement

19-20 November 2026

Conference Venue:

Aranytíz Kultúrház,

Budapest, Arany János u. 10, 1051 Hungary

EU enlargement has regained strategic momentum, but it is unfolding in a profoundly changed geopolitical context. Ukraine's accession process, alongside those of the Western Balkans and other candidate countries, is changing both the scale and the nature of the enlargement debate. The question is not only how to accelerate the accession process, but also how a larger and more diverse Union can function effectively, maintain its cohesion, and deliver on its political, economic and social ambitions.

The prospect of further enlargement raises fundamental questions about the EU's institutional architecture, decision-making capacity, budget and common policies, as well as about the balance between geopolitical urgency and a credible, merit-based accession process. At the same time, new approaches to enlargement are gaining prominence. While gradual integration mechanisms are allowing candidate countries to benefit from closer integration ahead of accession, new proposals for *associate membership* and other differentiated models are opening up a broader discussion about what EU membership could look like in the future.

Ensuring that a renewed enlargement agenda does not create new dividing lines, prolonged 'waiting rooms', or competing categories of EU membership will be a central challenge.

The Fourth Progressive Enlargement Conference brings together progressive partners, decision-makers, politicians and experts from the candidate countries, as well as EU lawmakers and stakeholders, to address these vital issues. The discussion will focus on how the progressive family can contribute to shaping an enlargement policy capable of responding to Europe's ongoing transformations, while preserving a credible European perspective for all candidate countries.

The conference is organised by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS), the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), PRO International, the Kalevi Sorsa Foundation, the Olof Palme International Center, the Renner Institut, CeSPI, Progresiva in the framework of the Enlargement Programme and in support with the Political History Foundation (PTA) and the Foundation for Social Democracy (SZDA).

AGENDA

Thursday, 19 November

Morning ***Participants' arrival***

14:30-15:00 ***Registration***

15:00-15:15 ***Welcome & introduction***
László Andor, Secretary General, FEPS
Sarah Hees-Kalyani, Regional Coordinator Dialogue Southeast Europe, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue Southeast Europe
Bertalan Tóth, Chair of the Foundation for Social Democracy

15:15-16:45 **Session one - Enlargement at a crossroads: reconciling merit-based accession with the EU's strategic interests**

The renewed geopolitical relevance of enlargement raises a fundamental question: how can the EU address its strategic interests while preserving a credible, fair and merit-based accession process? Candidate countries are progressing at different speeds and face different political, institutional and security challenges. While geopolitical considerations have increased the urgency of enlargement, accession must continue to depend on democratic reforms, the rule of law and compliance with EU standards. Maintaining this balance is essential not only to preserve the credibility of the process but also to prevent double standards or the perception that some candidates are being prioritised over others for strategic reasons. This panel will explore how the EU can reconcile these two dimensions of enlargement. What role should geopolitical considerations play in accession decisions? How can the EU maintain credible conditionality while responding to an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment? And how can a progressive approach ensure that renewed political momentum translates into a credible European perspective for all candidate countries, while supporting democratic transformation and avoiding new divisions among them?

Speakers:
Tinatin Akhvlediani, Head of EU Enlargement Programme, CEPS

Lejla Mesihovic, Professor, Head of the Department of International Relations & European Studies, Burch University in Sarajevo

Respondent:
Venko Filipče, President, SDSM, North Macedonia

Moderation:
Jelena Simic, Project and Communication Manager, Kalevi Sorsa Foundation, Finland

16:45-17:15 ***Coffee break***

17:15-17:45 **Presentation of the report on the fact-finding mission to North Macedonia**

This session will present the main findings of the fact-finding mission to North Macedonia conducted in Skopje from 29 to 31 October 2026 by FEPS and a delegation of partner organisations. Through meetings with political actors, institutions, civil society representatives, experts and other relevant stakeholders, the mission examined the country's political and institutional developments, the state of democratic reforms and the main challenges affecting its EU accession process. The report will highlight key findings from the mission and their implications for North Macedonia's European perspective and the broader enlargement debate.

Speaker:
Sabina de Silva, Researcher, CeSPI, Italy

Moderation:
Christian Salm, Head of Democracy and Participation Programmes, FEPS

19:00 **Dinner**

Location: BorLaBor Étterem

1053. Budapest, Veres Pálné utca 7.

Friday 20 November

08:45-09:15 **Registration**

09:15-09:45 **Opening remarks and Q&A**

András Rácz, Deputy Director General for Research and Scientific Affairs, Hungarian Institute of International Affairs

Discussion with the audience

Moderation:
László Andor, Secretary General, FEPS

09:45-11:15 **Session two – Budgetary dynamics and single market integration: preparing the EU member states and the candidate countries for enlargement**

The potential accession of countries with different economic sizes, productive structures and levels of development raises important questions about the future configuration of the EU budget, the allocation of resources and the functioning of key common policies. At the same time, the progressive integration of candidate countries into the single market offers new economic opportunities but requires a process of convergence and adaptation on both sides. The panel will discuss how to prepare both the EU and candidate countries for the economic implications of the next enlargement. What will the accession of new members mean for the EU budget and for policies such as cohesion and the Common Agricultural Policy? How can single market integration promote economic and social convergence while avoiding widening disparities between and within countries? Which financial instruments and pre-accession policies can support this transformation? From a progressive perspective, the discussion will also explore how enlargement can become a driver

of sustainable growth, social cohesion and reduced inequalities in both EU member states and candidate countries.

Speakers:
Ana Milinković, Economist at the Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies (wiiw)
Magdolna Sass, Director, Institute of World Economics, Hungary

Moderation:
Kido Koenig, Director, PRO International

11:15-11:45 ***Coffee break***

11:45-13:15 **Session three - Reforming before enlarging? Inside the Commission's pre-accession review**

The prospect of a Union of more than 30 members raises fundamental questions about the EU's capacity to act, take decisions effectively and preserve democratic legitimacy and cohesion. Preparing for enlargement, therefore, requires not only that candidate countries undertake reforms, but also that the EU itself assess whether its institutions, policies and decision-making mechanisms are fit for a larger Union. Against the backdrop of the Commission's pre-accession review, this panel will focus on the EU's internal readiness for enlargement. Which institutional and decision-making reforms are necessary for an enlarged Union to function effectively? In which areas could existing rules and procedures become increasingly difficult to sustain as membership expands? Should internal reform precede enlargement, or can the two processes advance in parallel? And how can the EU strengthen its capacity to act without turning its own reform process into an additional obstacle to accession? The discussion will explore how to prepare the Union institutionally and politically for enlargement while maintaining the credibility and momentum of the accession process.

Speakers:
Julian Plottka, Scientific Senior Project Manager, Institut für Europäische Politik

Iliriana Gjoni, Research Analyst at Carnegie Europe, Policy Leader Fellow at the European University Institute

Respondent:
Klára Dobrev, Member of the European Parliament, Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, Hungary

Moderation:
Marco Schwarz, Policy Officer, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung EU Office

13:15-14:30 ***Lunch at the venue***

14:30-15:15 **Spotlight session - From university plenums to the Parliament: how Serbian students reshaped Serbian politics**

On 1 November 2024, the deadly collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy sparked nationwide demonstrations linking the tragedy to government corruption and negligence under the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Led primarily by university students, what began as anti-corruption rallies rapidly evolved into a formidable political force. Following two years of sustained mobilisation, a student-backed electoral list secured a historic victory in national elections. In this

panel, a representative of the Serbian student movement joins us to examine the developments behind this electoral success and discuss the daunting challenges ahead: from forming a government to ruling the country.

Speaker:
Aleksa Popović, Serbian activist

Moderation:
Hedwig Giusto, Head of the International Programme, FEPS

15:45-16:30 **Guided walk to Parliament**

For those who wish to join, FEPS Secretary General László Andor will lead a guided walk to the Parliament, via Liberty Square and Kossuth Square (about 45 minutes)

16:30-18:30 **Visit to the Parliament**

1-hour guided tour inside the building

1-hour discussion with the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr. Márton Hajdu, to discuss the role of the Hungarian Parliament in the EU enlargement process

19:00 **Dinner**

Location: Retro Lángos Budapest - V3

1054 Budapest Vécsey utca 3

Saturday 21 November

Throughout the day *Participants' departure*

European Parliament

This Conference is organised with the financial support of the European Parliament. It does not represent the view of the European Parliament.