

## The EU's enlargement and NATO's prospects in the context of the war and post-war political dynamics

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### Abstract


*Combining EU and NATO analyses is useful for projecting an integrated vision for the future of Europe. The topic of a new EU enlargement got political momentum after 2022, more than 20 years after the previous wave of optimism and interest for the post-communist Central and Eastern European countries. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is certainly the main reason of this renewed interest. The European Council of mid-December 2023 decided to open the negotiations for EU accession with two new candidates, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, marking this way a historic shift of the EU enlargement policy in relation to the post-Soviet republics, after the accession of the Baltic States in 2004. This research explores the turbulent context in which both the EU and NATO should shape their convergent perspectives for the next institutional reforms, not only limited to enlargement(s) but also regarding the new (external as well as internal) contestations and revisionism. The article also deals with the major challenges of the international security context and addresses an essential question – Does Europe need a Plan B?*

**Keywords:** EU, NATO, enlargement, war, Ukraine, Russia

### Introduction: EU and NATO in the crucial electoral year 2024<sup>1</sup>

Just after the European elections of 6-9 June 2024, the European Union faces a context of major political changes at global, European, regional and national democratic levels. Both outside and inside the EU, the political conditions are evolving. One of the objectives announced in the former term is the EU enlargement.

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At the beginning of the new legislature, an analytical view over the chances to fulfil this objective is useful and timely.

Two and a half years after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the military stalemate on the Ukrainian front is associated with the Western political commitment to support Ukraine as long as it takes to resist the aggression. Despite Kremlin's hope with regard to a quick Western fatigue in supporting Ukraine, the financial and military aid did not fade until the autumn of 2023, and it was strongly resumed after important decisions adopted in April 2024 (Ryan & O'Grady, 2024). After an interruption of about six months, the US, EU and UK deliver again arms and ammunition to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, also important financial support for the Ukrainian government. Although the Western sanctions against Russia did not prove to have immediate and powerful impact, they added a contribution to the weakening of the Russian economy and its war machine. Sooner or later, the impact of the sanctions will become visible and impossible to be hidden by the Russian war economy. The major incursion of the Ukrainian Forces in the western provinces of Russia, especially in Kursk, started on August 6<sup>th</sup>, triggered a new dynamic of the war and pushed Russia to defensive measures. The "equation" of possible armistice talks between Russia and Ukraine in 2025 has been completely changed after this surprising Ukrainian maneuver. It remains to be seen if the Ukrainian forces will be able to stabilize and keep their positions in Kursk as long as this could be exploited military and politically by Kyiv in relation to Moscow.

There is no clear indication *when* and especially *how* this war will end. It might be going on for years and years, it can stop next year, or it can continue as a frozen conflict. If it's about the enlargement of the EU in the Eastern Neighbourhood, it is self-evident that this *cannot happen during the war*.

Only in a post-war context, the EU would clearly assess the opportunity, conditions, and format of a possible enlargement. For now, these are just optimistic and encouraging discussions, and everything can change in the next years. We need also to take into consideration that "enlargement" refers not only to Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia but to the Western Balkans as well.

Moreover, the new approach of combining the topic of EU enlargement with the one of revisioning the EU Treaty (TEU) could be tricky. Although starting from the reasonable assumption that UE cannot function properly with 29, 30, 32 or 35 member-states keeping its unanimity principles, this emerging conditionality could become a "perfect trap" for the EU and the candidate countries while neither the TEU revision nor the enlargement would be eventually achieved, the two ideas blocking each other.

Most of the European leaders seem prepared to reassure and give messages of encouragement to the embattled Eastern Neighbourhood, especially for the pro-European Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. However, there is a long and difficult way until a possible accession of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, not to mention Georgia, and even the discussed horizon of 2030 is not a certitude. A

set of political, economic and social variables may change in nuance (or even fundamentally) the European perspective of the Eastern Neighbourhood in the coming years. The paper explores the main scenarios of the EU's intended enlargement.

Since 1949, NATO has been the linchpin of the Western order. The US' security guarantees, incorporated in the famous art. 5 of the North-Atlantic Treaty, safeguarded the European liberal democracies and created the best conditions in history for freedom, prosperity and development. With NATO and its European allies, the US in its turn succeeded to consolidate its global pre-eminence, hegemonic influence and international prestige in the post-WWII era. This "magic" win-win deal of the transatlantic alliance provided both to the USA and democratic Europe everything they needed to succeed – peace, collective security, democracy and liberal values, trust to invest, global influence, world-wide recognition.

It is even more surprising to see that the anti-Western revisionist offensive of the Oriental dictatorships (Russia, China, Iran, North-Korea) coincides with the NATO-skeptic electoral rhetoric of the US presidential candidate Donald Trump. The North-Atlantic Alliance survived non-divided and even strengthened after the Putin's War against the West, but it is difficult to predict what a Trump new presidency could mean for the Western world.

The Cold War and the post-Cold War history of NATO is great, but the main issue is the future. I will not recall in my paper the key-role of NATO after 1949, as a linchpin of the Western world. The historians do this much better. Briefly said, NATO safeguarded the liberal-democratic paradigm of an entire post-war epoch, defining the foundation of the strategic concept of the West during the Cold War as well as after 1990. The democratic Europe relied both on NATO and the European Communities (later the EU, after the Maastricht Treaty).

On this foundation of peace, democracy, collective security, liberal values and trust everything else could be built. Prosperity came as a result of all these pillars which were secured by NATO. Here, in the post-communist Europe, we enjoyed the benefits of the Euro-Atlantic security umbrella after the multiple enlargements started in 1999.

Referring to NATO at the 75<sup>th</sup> celebration moment, it is impossible to ignore the increasing pressures coming from both external and internal political environment. The anti-Western axis of the authoritarian regimes (Russia, China, Iran, North Korea), even in this emerging version of collaboration, combined with the revisionist electoral rhetoric promoted by Donald Trump could prepare in the next years a dangerous "Molotov cocktail" for the North-Atlantic Alliance and the Western order.

We are now in the midst of a "perfect storm". The system of international relations convulses at global level and shakes in many regional conflicts, crises or tensions. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launched on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, aggravated and accelerated the process of changing the European security order. Even what we used to name for more than three decades the "post-Cold War Era" is now ended. We entered therefore in a period of transition towards

a new system of international relations, challenging most of the organizations, treaties, alliances and national foreign policy doctrines.

Nevertheless, the revisionist movement and the hybrid war did not start with the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine. It actually started 16 years earlier, but the repeated wake up calls from Eastern Europe were ignored or minimized by the West. The East-European voices were considered “exaggerated”, “panic mongers” or “blocked in the ideological tranches of the Cold War”.

Putin’s War against the West started in our vision with the Russian invasion of the pro-West Georgia in August 2008. It was just four months after he participated as an observer at the Bucharest NATO Summit, where then-US President Bush proposed to invite Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO. The Western European allies, mainly Germany and France, opposed to this idea. It was still the time when Paris and Berlin, like other Western European centres of influence, were sufficiently naïve or financially interested to preserve their good relations with Russia.

NATO lost in April 2008 an excellent window of opportunity to secure both Ukraine and Georgia and to consolidate this way the European security. To those who counterargue with the risk of a war with Russia, let just remind them the successful integration of other three post-Soviet republics, the Baltic States, who were not attacked by Russia after becoming NATO member states in 2004.

Putin tested this way the Western reaction in 2008 and nothing serious happened. Continuing ‘business as usual’ with Russia gave to Kremlin the guarantees that the West will do nothing to defend the democratic post-Soviet republics who would like to join NATO or the EU in further enlargement phases.

After the small ‘Georgian test’ of 2008, the Crimea’s annexation of March 2014 was the second episode of Putin’s War. Again, nothing serious happened to Russia, beyond some timid statements of condemnation and weak sanctions which did not really affect Russia. Even though the Russian threat was becoming bigger and bigger, President Macron was telling us in November 2019, just two years before Putin’s big defiance, that “NATO is braindead” (The Economist, 2019). This was even more surprising for us in this region, in the context of the restructuring process named “pivot to Eastern Flank”, which officially started at the Wales NATO Summit in September 2014 and continued at the Warsaw Summit in July 2016. Was NATO indeed “braindead” before the Russian invasion or it was just a reflection of an old anti-Americanism that persists in some Western-European cultures (e.g. in France)?

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in February 2022, was therefore the third Russian aggression against the post-Cold War European security order. One invasion per decade, we may say, each one bigger than the previous one. We can also include in this Russian anti-Western war the military intervention in Syria in the autumn of 2015, to protect the criminal regime of Bashar al-Assad, a defying way to show the incapacity of the West to find and impose solutions in regional conflicts. Not to mention the 2016 electoral moments in the US and UK, when the Russian

interference, disinformation and fake news on social media helped Donald Trump and the pro-Brexit camp to win.

Of course, one could say that none of these Russian military or hybrid interventions in the past years have something to do with NATO. Georgia and Ukraine are not NATO member states, therefore they did not have security guarantees, Syria is also out of our region of strategic and geopolitical interests covered by the Washington Treaty, while meddling in the US presidential elections and Brexit referendum was not clearly demonstrated as a Russian state aggression against Western democracies, although there were official reports in that sense (BBC News, 2018).

## **1. Goals and methods**

This paper explores the prospects of the EU enlargement policy in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the prospects of the North-Atlantic Alliance. We intend to define possible versions of this announced objective of the EU at the horizon of the next ten years and the respective conditionalities. NATO faces also a challenging moment, especially with the scenario of Trump's return to White House.

Different factors, variables and determinants will be included. Most of them are related to the war in Ukraine and its outcomes and consequences, national political evolutions in the EU member states but also in the Eastern European candidates, as well as the dynamics of the global context.

The research method is ACF (advocacy coalition framework) (International Public Policy Association, 2017), taking into consideration possible "coalitions" of agents of influence at global, European and regional level, and the "policy subsystems" related to the dynamics of the EU in the new legislature (2024-2029). Based on the ACF model, we will approach the EU enlargement policy and NATO's prospects with the qualitative method of comparative scenarios.

## **2. Analytical framework for EU enlargement: five scenarios**

Integrating a set of global, European, regional and national aspects and considerations regarding possible political evolutions, we identify five scenarios for the EU enlargement policy in the post-war context.

### **2.1. First scenario: full success by the end of 2030 or early 2031**

In this most optimistic scenario, the enlargement will be achieved in the next seven years, by the beginning of the new decade. Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and one or two candidates from the Western Balkans (e.g., Montenegro, North Macedonia or Albania) will be admitted. The Accession Treaty should be signed, whether the European political conditions permit, shortly after the June 2029 European elections and allow one or two years for the national ratifications. This is

the fastest and largest scenario we can imagine, taking into consideration the European political calendar and no “black swan”.

What are the conditions for this scenario? First and foremost, the end of the war in Ukraine (not just an armistice with a frozen conflict) and an independent Ukraine, with clear and undisputed territories. It requires no Russian troops on the official territory of Ukraine, even this would mean a smaller Ukraine. For the EU integration, it is essential to speak about clear, independent, non-occupied territories, capable to fully enforce European legislation (the *Acquis Communautaire*).

Second, a reintegrated Transnistria within the official, recognized territory of the Republic of Moldova. In November 2023, President Maia Sandu made a very interesting proposal, suggesting that the Republic of Moldova could “join the EU in two steps” (Timu & Vilcu, 2023), first with the west bank of Dniester, later (nobody knows when or if...) with the left bank. It could reproduce somehow the EU accession of Cyprus in 2004, without de occupied northern part of the island, as Josep Borrell admitted. This proposal has two faces and actually it can be understood also as a *de facto* renouncement to Transnistria, since the EU will have to take all necessary measures for the security of the EU Eastern border. Would Ukraine or Georgia accept the same partial territorial integration in the EU, without the occupied territories? Would the EU as a whole and the EU member states accept such a compromise, that leads to the possibility of a future Russian exclave between Moldova and Ukraine? It remains to be seen. The proposal was not much commented, but it triggers a lot of political and judicial challenges.

Third, democratic reforms and political stability in the Western Balkans and a no-surprise pro-European trajectory of the most advanced countries of the region in European integration. Even in the most optimistic scenario, we do not see Serbia becoming a full EU member by 2031 but possibly some of the smaller countries, with less problems and a clear pro-West orientation.

Fourth, successful negotiations and closing of all 35 chapters by the end of 2028, which is a tight calendar for Ukraine and Moldova who have just started the negotiations, and almost impossible for Georgia. For Romania and Bulgaria, in a positive and relatively calm European “political climate”, with no war and no major crisis, the negotiations took four years and the ratification almost two years in 25 member states.

Fifth, no veto from any of the 27 EU member states, with questionable perspectives from Hungary, Netherlands, Austria, Slovak Republic or other EU member states that could switch to or confirm their Eurosceptic and populist orientations. The Dutch new coalition is already a possible opponent to the idea of EU enlargement. The new governments in Austria (after the September 29<sup>th</sup> federal elections) and Belgium (after the negotiation of a new coalition with right wing parties), not to mention the snap elections in France on June 30<sup>th</sup> and July 7<sup>th</sup>, could bring on the stage in Brussels new Eurosceptic actors.

Sixth, no major change in the pro-enlargement orientation of the three big European economies having elections during this window of opportunity: Germany in 2025, France and Italy in 2027.

At the end of the day, this is an *all-or-nothing* scenario, in which each of the six pre-requirements is mandatory for a full success and any failure on one side or another can ruin this scenario.

## 2.2. Second scenario: less and later

This is still an optimistic scenario, but a moderate one. According to it, the enlargement won't be massive, and it won't happen by the end of 2030, but eventually there will be an enlargement in the next decade.

According to this scenario, the calendar of enlargement will be longer, taking *about 10-11 years*, and at the end just *two or three countries* would join the EU. As a possible horizon, I would mention the spring of 2034, just before the European elections of that year. The candidates should therefore sign the Accession Treaty (together or separately) by 2032, followed by a complete process of ratification in one or two years.

The Republic of Moldova, Montenegro and Albania are probably the states that still can join the EU even in this moderate optimistic scenario. Georgia is also a small country, but it is difficult to make predictions for a state which did not yet start the negotiations and it is deeply politically divided between the Georgian Dream Party and the pro-European opposition.

For Ukraine, a big country with a large population and many economic and social problems, *the longer will be the integration negotiations the less chances to finalize talks will have*. The project of Turkey's EU integration is an example of a failure because of political procrastination, in which both Ankara and Brussels lost momentum of the mid-2000s, then things went from bad to worse.

After the war, the pro-Ukrainian wave of popular support and sympathy in Western societies is supposed to start to decrease and maybe stabilize at a medium level. We cannot not exclude in the future the possibility to see less pro-European or more nationalist governments in Kyiv. The popular support for President Zelenski in Ukraine will inevitably start to decline in the next years. The problem of corruption will become more visible after the war. It is also not clear whether Ukraine will accept the method of "two steps integration" proposed by President Maia Sandu for her country, in the first phase without the occupied territories.

It is self-evident that smaller countries have better chances to be fully integrated, if they respect of course all the other conditions presented in the first scenario – a clearly sovereign and undisputed territory, no frozen conflicts, no occupation army on their territory, no alternation in government with pro-Russian parties, democratic reforms, rule of law and full success in the negotiations with the European Commission.

For the Republic of Moldova, in both optimistic scenarios, the conditions to join the EU remain related to a clear solution for Transnistria (either reintegration or the “two steps integration in the EU”), political stability and continuous pro-European government, as well as no veto from any of the EU member states. The presidential election of October 2024 and the parliamentary election of 2025 will be of a crucial importance for the chances of Chişinău to finalize the negotiations for EU integration in the next eight years. Once the pro-West orientation of Chişinău would be lost in the next years (at the level of Presidency, Parliament or Government), the process of integration would be obviously frozen for an indefinite period.

### **2.3. Third scenario. The neutral prospect**

The third version of the future for the EU’s Eastern Neighbourhood comes with a rather neutral perspective. No significant success of the EU enlargement ambitions in the next ten years, but also no political failure or major crisis of the region. The *Europeanization* of the EU neighbourhood will continue, with democratic reforms, economic development and some steps of partial political integration, with new mechanisms, formats and structures invented to accept and absorb Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, but no full admission as EU member states.

A sort of “*Associated +*” status, in a reinvigorated Eastern Partnership, maybe under a different name for the new candidates. There is already a Franco-German plan made by experts which proposed a four-circles Europe, with “an inner circle, then the current EU, the associate states and the European Political Community” (Vela & Sorgi, 2023).

In this scenario, the accession perspective for the candidate countries is not officially closed but there will be no new EU member state in the next ten years. The EU will continue to speak about the necessity of enlargement and institutional reforms.

### **2.4. Fourth scenario. No enlargement without prior EU reforms and the enlargement discussions suspended**

This is the scenario based on the conclusion that the EU can no longer accept new members before the revision of the Lisbon Treaty.

Internal pressures for political and institutional changes and reforms become so powerful that they suspend (but not officially cancel) the topic of enlargement. Disagreements between the 27 EU member states will be deep and hard to be resolved. Big countries and economies such as France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands start to press for a multi-speed or concentric EU, and they open the discussion for Treaty changes.

Peripheral countries will be afraid of being even more marginalized or to become “second class member states”, opposing to the idea of a new Treaty. Some countries do not accept to renounce to the principle of decisional unanimity in the



Council or to the member of the College of the European Commission designated by each state, for the same reason of losing power and influence and becoming insignificant member states.

Once the conditionality of a revision of the EU Treaty would be introduced by France and Germany, the enlargement policy will leave the agenda for quite a long time. I do not expect a swift consensus on the idea of a TEU revision and especially on a new version of the Treaty, even if an intergovernmental conference is launched with this purpose. This process of reflection and debate could become a “perfect trap” for the EU enlargement policy. Neither TEU revision, nor EU enlargement will be achieved in this scenario in the next ten years. The condition of ratification in national referenda comes also with high risks, as we know from previous experiences.

The momentum of enlargement and reforms triggered by the war in Ukraine would be lost in never ending political controversies with regard to the future of the European Union and its new institutional architecture.

This scenario is a moderate-pessimistic one, because even if it does not allow a new enlargement it still keeps the Eastern Neighbourhood in the backwaters of the European Union, not of Russia. Neither the EU nor the Eastern Neighbourhood are externally threatened by major crises or by an extension of the war in Ukraine, and the only reason for the failure of enlargement are the internal political disagreements between the visions and interests of the member states regarding the future of the European Union.

The main difference between the third and the fourth scenarios is given by the undecided, respectively the decided verdict regarding the EU enlargement. In the third version, it will still not be clear after the next ten years whether there will be an enlargement or not, while in the fourth scenario the topic is closed until a new EU Treaty.

## **2.5. Fifth scenario. Defeat and complete failure**

Russia succeeds in this war to block the pro-European prospects of the Eastern candidates and/or the EU fails in a deep political crisis, amidst a deterioration of the world order. Deep political, social and ideological cleavages would erupt in the EU, dividing our democracies, as we can see after the attack of Hamas against Israel. It remains to be seen whether Russia would also succeed to destabilize the Western Balkans. A new US administration starting in January 2025, possibly led by Donald Trump, will gradually reduce the military support for Ukraine.

Re-capturing Ukraine and Moldova by the Russian military or with hybrid instruments could demoralize the EU in continuing its enlargement ambitions and make them useless.

It remains also to be seen how the EU will work after the European elections. The good news is that the pro-European EPP had a solid growth, and it can form a new coalition. But there also some bad news for the *more Europe* option. ECR and

ID together exceed even the S&D. Both the Socialists and Renew are in decline in the new European Parliament. ECR alone is now above Renew. It is still not clear if ECR and ID will work together or not, but even if they will collaborate only for some topics, then it will be difficult to ignore their position.

Moreover, the French snap elections on June 30<sup>th</sup> and July 7<sup>th</sup> could bring a RN led government, with significant negative influence in the Council of the EU, regarding the decisions on enlargement policy. As for the US presidential elections, the eventuality of a return to White House of the former president Trump would possibly weaken the US military and financial support for Ukraine, with major consequences in the war.

There could be several sub-versions of this most pessimistic scenario, from a major war in Europe to a deep crisis of the EU or of the West as a whole. This differentiation is less important for the EU enlargement perspective since all of these sub-versions would make any enlargement impossible and come with a severe deterioration of the European political climate. Obviously, this one would be considered the “catastrophic” military and political scenario.

### **3. NATO in the context of the unpredictability of the US politics and transatlantic ties: three scenarios**

Coming to Donald Trump and the scenario of his possible return to the White House, one could say that NATO survived during Trump’s first term, while his current threats towards the European allies have only electoral meanings nowadays. If nothing bad happened with NATO in the first Trump’s term, why should we be worried for the second term? The answer is easy and simple: because the second term could be significantly different, and we need to take into consideration all possible scenarios as soon as possible.

To complete the present landscape and understand the context, we need to add that NATO as a whole and most of the allies started a series of military preparations to increase their defence capacity. NATO seems today in good political shape, looking for credible solutions to reassure its members on the effectiveness of its article 5, and also for supporting Ukraine to resist the Russian aggression. Putin’s War woke up many sleeping democracies in the West, starting with the famous *Zeitenwende* speech of chancellor Scholz on the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, just a few days after the invasion. Even President Macron, once well known for his long and useless phone talks with Putin just before the invasion, has recently made the unexpected proposal of sending troops (mission) to Ukraine.

However, beyond our unity, political solidarity with Ukraine and military preparations for a possible war of defence, we “see the iceberg coming”. Military and political leaders from many European countries draw scenarios of a Russian attack against NATO in the next 5-8 years (Camut, 2024).

Revisionism from outside and inside the Western world threatens the armour of our alliance. The electoral “super year” of 2024 but also the elections of the coming years in Germany, France and other European democracies will test the solidity of our common vision. Basically everywhere, on both sides of the Atlantic, the nationalists, sovereigntists and revisionists are gaining ground, speaking about a turning point in Western politics. We should notice that a Prime Minister from a NATO and EU country, Viktor Orban speaks clearly about his belief that “the Western hegemony is ended, and a new world order is coming” (Daily News Hungary, 2024). This is pure revisionism, and we could expect Orban to switch at any time from bad to worse. He has never made a secret in blaming and discrediting the Trianon Treaty, for example.

Moreover, if we look outside the Western integrated space, we see already two wars in the EU's Neighbourhoods, where two democracies were attacked by anti-Western aggressors in the East and in the South. We also see increasing military pressures in the Strait of Taiwan, Iranian-sponsored terrorist and military factions attacking in the Middle East and the Red Sea, threatening drills and nuclear tests in the Korean Peninsula. The current world order is challenged with increasing aggressivity.

Europe, Middle East, and Asia boil in hot water. The two ongoing wars could be followed soon by other aggressions, in other regions. Of course, NATO is not a panacea for all conflicts in the world and it is not supposed to defend all countries which become victims of military aggression. The idea of “NATO globalization” (Kitchen, 2010), although not new, is still far from being largely accepted. For example, France recently refused the opening of a NATO liaison office in Japan (Lau & Kayali, 2023), obviously because of its reluctance to disturb Chinese sensitivities.

Before any hypothetical discussion about NATO globalization, let's take first into consideration European security. The Alliance's main contributor, the USA, is just a few months away from crucial presidential elections. The former president Donald Trump has a good chance to return to the White House, in the circumstances of a decreasing rate of approval for President Biden and his administration to a historic low of 38 percent (Irwin, 2024). Even after Joe Biden's withdrawal and the replacement with Kamala Harris, the polls still indicate a very tight race.

The radicalism of recent Trump's declarations about the lack of US commitment to European security leaves very little space for hope. Even considered in an internal “electoral key” or as a strategy of communication to prepare for tough discussions for money with the European leaders (as he recently pretended in an interview (McDonald, 2024), these statements do not provide a sense of calm and trust within NATO. We also have in mind that this is a politician who was charged for insurrection in his own country, so revisionism is a familiar idea for Donald Trump not only at international level, but also at domestic level. Everything can happen.

It would be very difficult to collaborate with an American president who said to another NATO country leader, according to his own public confessions: “You didn't pay? You're delinquent? No, I would not protect you. In fact, I would

encourage them to do whatever the hell they want. You gotta pay. You gotta pay your bills.” (Colvin, 2024). There are voices from US urging us to take seriously into consideration Trump’s threatening about leaving NATO (Concepcion, 2024) in the next years, despite the US recent legislation which bans an immediate unilateral decision of the President to leave the Alliance. The laws can also be changed, whether the GOP would get a comfortable majority in both houses of the Congress.

Moreover, it is not only about Donald Trump’s opinions. An anti-NATO revisionist trend seems to emerge in the American society. Maybe this is still marginal, but it is fuelled by major influencers like Elon Musk, who recently declared that he “always wondered why NATO continued to exist even though its nemesis and reason to exist, The Warsaw Pact, had dissolved” (Stanton, 2024). Of course, Elon Musk has proven many times that he is not the brightest mind in understanding politics, but we need to take into consideration that he has millions of followers on social media.

The need for a Plan B becomes self-evident. But a Plan B is certainly not an easy thing to be made. NATO in this present version is difficult to be replaced or compensated by European increased financial and military efforts. The UK government, for example, recently recognized that it “does not have a contingency plan for Donald Trump withdrawing the US from NATO” (Hazell, 2024) during a possible second term.

Taking into consideration all historical and logical indications, that there will be no US President ever to make the incredible mistake of withdrawing American troops and strategic presence from the European continent. The former US President George Bush jr. mentioned once that “the US considers vital to prevent that any power or group of powers will dominate the mainland of Eurasia” (Fettweiss, 2003). But, of course, staying in Europe is not necessarily a guarantee for activating article 5 in case of a Russian aggression, for which a consensus of the 32 member states is needed. A discredited NATO, although still formally valid, would not be of much help in case of a war.

On the other hand, NATO is not the only possible form of framing the US military and strategic presence in Europe – it is probably relevant to look more attentive in the future to bilateral and unilateral agreements.

In this context and having so unpredictable prospects in the following years, we reiterate that any alternative scenario to NATO is weaker than the Plan A and nobody in Europe would prefer it, but still a Plan B is needed.

Currently, we can imagine three theoretical scenarios for projecting the European security without a working, credible, effective NATO. None of them is ideal and all three have significant deficits of credibility.

First, let’s have a look to the EU recent endeavours to consolidate the European capacity of defence. Remarkable steps are mentioned – a plan to relaunch the European defence industry based on interoperability and standardization, a position for a new Commissioner for Defence, the military Schengen Space etc.

However, the old but nowadays refreshed idea of an “European Army” (EU Monitor, 2023) was frequently ridiculed in the past, for many reasons, some of them historical, others ideological or cultural. In May 1939, for example, the French socialists were rhetorically asking *Pourquoi mourir pour Dantzig?* (Herodote.net., 2024). The recent statement of President Macron regarding the idea of sending troops to Ukraine is not enough to erase this uncomfortable feeling of insecurity of the East-Europeans.

Even in the present times, the EU is not a security guarantee provider, and it won't become soon. The EU was not created to defend Europe but for other purposes. To become a security guarantee provider (“all for one” type), a new EU Treaty is needed with lots of structural changes, and this seems impossible to be achieved on a consensus basis, at least by the end of the decade. But still the concept of a “European pillar” within NATO, a sort of “armed forces of the EU within NATO”, is taken into consideration, although is still a fuzzy concept.

Second, the regional scenario. The old Pilsudski's idea of *Intermarium* redivivus! An effective alliance of Central and Eastern European countries, with Finland, Poland, Romania, Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, the Baltic States, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic etc. Would such a regional format work, defending the area between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea? Also difficult to imagine, since this is a combination of very different countries from inside and outside the EU and NATO, with little experience to work together.

Third, bilateral or minilateral alliances negotiated between the Eastern Flank countries and the United States of America, including or not other countries such as the UK, Canada or some EU states. It is commonly assumed that Donald Trump likes *transactional politics* and probably he would prefer bilateral security agreements with some countries from the Eastern Flank, based on financial commitments, military procurements etc.

For the moment, these are the three theoretical versions of a Plan B, working as an alternative either to a discredited NATO or to an alliance from which Donald Trump would have withdrawn the US. Certainly, none of them is better than the current NATO and the Plan A. But just staying and waiting to see what happens could be a fatal error for Europe.

## Conclusions

The purpose of combining EU and NATO prospects is to project an integrated vision for the future of Europe. In the case of the EU, we analyzed the spectrum of five scenarios in the context of the two present wars (Ukraine and Gaza, both with possible extensions) and multiple crises in international politics. We see that the first two of them are optimistic (fully optimistic or moderate-optimistic), one is neutral and undecided but we still “can live with it”, while two pessimistic versions of the future do not give chances to further EU enlargement towards East.

The differences between each of two successive scenarios may not seem important (e.g., from the third to the fourth) but just nuances. However, the overall prospects of the EU enlargement policy cover a large range of possibilities, from full success to a total failure.

What exactly will decide which scenario will become a reality? In essence, it is about the dynamics of the *European political agenda*. Agenda setting in Brussels is always a matter of combining political rationality with emotions of the public opinion. Both can change rapidly, depending on external and internal developments. It seems a paradox but the war in Ukraine opened a window of opportunity to relaunch the discussion on EU enlargement. Whether this window of opportunity will be used with positive results for the EU and the Eastern Neighbourhood, or it will close before any achievement of the enlargement policy, it remains to be seen in the next ten years.

In the case of NATO, there is a shorter list of scenarios and most of them depend on the US politics and the future of transatlantic relations. With just a few months before the US presidential elections of November 5<sup>th</sup>, the polls indicate a very tight race between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. With Harris and democrats in power, it is likely to see a continuation of the current vision of Washington with regard to the European security. With Trump and the republicans at White House and in the Congressional majority, many things can change although there is no certitude of a dramatic revision of the US' foreign and security policy. Only the existence of the risk of this change should be enough to make the Europeans reconsider the need to improve their own capacity to defend Europe.

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