



Degree Program in International Relations

Course of **Comparative History of Political Systems**

The Fifth Enlargement of the European Union and Its Impact on EU-Russia Relations

Giovanni Orsina

SUPERVISOR

Carolina De Stefano

CO-SUPERVISOR

Enrico Ciappi

CO-SUPERVISOR

655562

CANDIDATE

Academic Year 2024/2025

“The integration of Europe is a way to manage globalization peacefully and democratically. And everyone agrees that this is the only attempt that has ever succeeded in the history of the world. Let us have no illusions: Europe will be able to maintain its levels of prosperity, to defend its fundamental values and retain its independence in the world only if it can reunite the whole continent in peace and democracy.”

*Address given by the President of the Commission,
Romano Prodi, the day before the fifth enlargement
Trieste, Italy, 30 April 2004*

Acknowledgements

Before proceeding with the discussion, I would like to dedicate these lines to my friends and colleagues who have been close to me in recent years and with whom I have shared unforgettable moments in Rome and Paris.

In particular, I would like to thank my sister Alice, for whom I hope to be an inspiration for her future great successes, and my family for their constant support during these years.

I wish to thank my best friends Riccardo, Tommaso, Giorgio, and Tommaso for being by my side for many years; my cherished friend Fabio, who helped me fully appreciate the beauty of Rome and always made me feel at home, and my dear friend Alex, with whom I have shared the best memories in Paris along the banks of the Seine and under the shadow of the Eiffel Tower.

Finally, a heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Professor Orsina, and my co-supervisors, Professor De Stefano and Professor Ciappi, for their invaluable guidance in drafting this thesis.

I hope this research will be a good omen for the European Union and its glorious future.

Abstract

This thesis examines the history of the fifth enlargement, both from the point of view of the European Union institutions and from the Russian perspective. Furthermore, the relations between Brussels and Moscow during the 1990s and early 2000s are examined to understand the historical reasons for the Big Bang enlargement and to develop reasoning to understand what lessons can be drawn for future enlargements of the European Union. The research was conducted using a qualitative approach, involving a review of thematic literature on the fifth enlargement and the relations between the Union and Russia. The results indicate that the collaboration between the two parties has been beneficial from the economic and political perspectives, promoting various policies of rapprochement and cooperation during the historical phase immediately following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. However, it also emerged that the Russian vision towards the Union had evolved following the election of Vladimir Putin as President, creating an apparent discontinuity in relations with Brussels over time. The thesis contributes to a more complete understanding of this historical phase, hoping to draw interesting insights for future enlargement processes.

Key words

Brussels, Enlargement, Europe, European Union (EU), Foreign Policy, Kremlin, Moscow, NATO, Russia, Union, 2004.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
 Chapter I: EU-Russia relations in the 1990s and early 2000s.....	10
1.1: The relationship between the European Union and Russia in the early 1990s.....	10
1.2: EU-Russia dialogue in the late 1990s.....	14
1.3: Divergent paths between Brussels and Moscow in the early 2000s.....	19
 Chapter II: History of the “Big Bang” Enlargement from the Union perspective...26	
2.1: Post-Cold War Enlargement during the Delors Commission (1989-1995).....	26
2.2: Enlargement challenges and the Santer Commission (1995-1999).....	32
2.3: The Prodi Commission and the Fifth Enlargement (1999-2004).....	37
 Chapter III: Russian perspective on the EU expansion.....	43
3.1: Russia’s initial response to the EU Enlargement in the post-Soviet space.....	43
3.2: The Russian position on EU Expansion during Putin’s first mandate.....	47
3.3: From collaboration to confrontation: Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia.....	52
 Chapter IV: The meaning and impact of the Fifth Enlargement	62
4.1: Retrospective on the Eastern expansion.....	62
4.2: EU missteps during the Fifth Enlargement.....	67
4.3: Framing the future of EU integration.....	72
 Conclusion.....	79
 Bibliography.....	85

Introduction

On May 9, 1950, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman presented the Schuman Declaration, launching the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community.¹ This initiative created the foundation for what we today are familiar as the European Union. His words have been engraved in history: the creation of a deeply integrated Europe to preserve the stability of the continent after the two world wars.² Schuman's vision of a united Europe capable of promoting peace and prosperity has evolved, playing a key role in shaping the continent's political and economic agenda. However, seventy-five years later, the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has highlighted the enormous limitations of the European Union.³

The thesis initiates its analysis in the late 1980s, a period marked by Mikhail Gorbachev's presidency of the Soviet Union and Jacques Delors' presidency of the European Commission. During this period, the relations between the USSR and the European Union entered a phase of increased collaboration, particularly in the economic sphere. The improvement in relations between the Union and Russia continued even after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and under the impetus of the first Russian President Yeltsin, the collaboration between the two parties was further strengthened and developed both economically and politically.⁴ From 1999 onwards, relations between the two actors began to change. This evolution was mainly due to the NATO invasion of Serbia in the spring of 1999 and, at the end of the same year, the beginning of the Putin Presidency.⁵ Despite these differences, the collaboration between the Union and the Kremlin persisted into the early 2000s, fostering not only economic and political cooperation but also collaboration in matters of security.⁶

The improvement of relations between Russia and the European Union during the analyzed historical phase, along with the subsequent cooperation, can be understood by

¹ European Union (1950). Schuman declaration May 1950. https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950_en.

² Ibid.

³ Szewczyk, B. (2022). Putin Has Popped the EU Defense Bubble. *Foreign Policy*.

⁴ Antonenko, O. & Pinnick, K. (2005). *Russia and the European Union: Prospects for a New Relationship*. London: Routledge. p. 19.

⁵ Lynch, A.C. (2002). The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s. *The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s. Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*. pp. 161–182.

⁶ Antonenko, O. & Pinnick, K. (2005). *Russia and the European Union: Prospects for a New Relationship*. p. 293.

comparing the strategic interests of both parties.⁷ For the Union, it was essential to ensure stability on the European continent after the Cold War and that Russia's nuclear arsenal be made safe in the delicate historical phase post-USSR. At the same time, there was support in the Union for the development of a more liberal and democratic Russia, which would have led to a clear improvement in relations between Moscow and the West in the economic sphere and to secure a long-term supplier of natural gas. In parallel, Russia saw an improvement in relations with Brussels, particularly in terms of promoting Russian economic development and maintaining a robust influence in the post-Soviet space.⁸ Furthermore, the Kremlin's foreign policy interests also favored a collaboration with the Union, both to maintain its territorial integrity and to maintain the status of a great international power, for instance, through participation in the G7 and defending the power of veto in the United Nations Security Council.

Moreover, to comprehend the 1990s and the early 2000s from the point of view of the Union, it is essential to look at the evolution of the path of European integration during that period. The fifth enlargement in May 2004 profoundly impacted the membership of the European institutions, expanding from fifteen to twenty-five countries by admitting ten new member states: Czechia, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, many of which were part of the Soviet bloc.⁹ Indeed, the enlargement in 2004 has been described as the culmination of a series of events that reunified Europe after the Cold War.¹⁰

Additionally, the "Big Bang Enlargement" impacted neighboring nations and key partners of the Union, but it did not include the most important country in Eastern Europe: Russia. As Allen Lynch described in detail in his research, "the extension of the European Union eastwards is not *per se* an issue for Russia."¹¹ However, Moscow has prevented Europe from having any influence over the direction of Russia's reform policies and internal affairs, refusing to accept harmonization with the European *acquis communautaire*.¹² The tensions between Russia and the European Union have contributed

⁷ Lynch, A.C. (2002). The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s. pp. 161–182.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 161–182.

⁹ European Union (2025). EU Enlargement. https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en.

¹⁰ O'Brennan, J. (2006). The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. Abingdon: Routledge. p. 1.

¹¹ Lynch, A.C. (2002). The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s. pp. 161–182.

¹² Ibid. pp. 161–182.

to the geopolitical crises faced by European countries in the twenty-first century, such as the invasion of Georgia, the invasion of Donbas, and finally, Ukraine.¹³ Indeed, this exclusion fostered Russia's mistrust towards the EU, contributing to a more aggressive foreign policy. Moreover, missed opportunities for deeper cooperation while impressing on the respect for human rights and democratic reforms, such as the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1994, led to a lack of integration and mutual understanding in the following years.¹⁴ For this reason, it is necessary to analyze how, in that historical phase, the enlargement impacted the Union's relations with Russia.

Therefore, the following research question is at the heart of this analysis: *What were the main missteps of the European Union during its fifth enlargement, and how did these affect EU-Russia relations?* In answering this question, the thesis will explore the relations between Brussels and Moscow in the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as the history of the fifth enlargement from an institutional and Russian perspective. In the context of the fifth enlargement, the European Union did not fully grasp the geopolitical consequences that this process would have on its relationship with Russia. Moscow was not considered a candidate for the Union's membership. Consequently, it was not bound by the same conditions imposed on the accession countries. By not addressing Russia's concerns directly, this situation led to growing tensions, missing the opportunity to bring Moscow into closer cooperation with the values of the European Union.

In the past years, much research has focused on the history and implications of the fifth enlargement, drawing on relevant sources that have been utilized throughout this analysis. Significant studies, such as Antonenko & Pinnick's (2005) "Russia and the European Union: Prospects for a New Relationship" and O'Brennan's (2006) "The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union," have analyzed the process and outcomes of Eastern Europe's democratization.¹⁵ Furthermore, "History of European Commission 1986-2000: History and Memories of an Institution" by Professor Varsori et al. (2019) effectively communicates to the readers the Union's perspective on the fifth enlargement

¹³ Szweczyk, B. (2022). Putin Has Popped the EU Defense Bubble.

¹⁴ European Union (1994). Consolidated version of the Agreement on partnership and cooperation establishing a partnership between the European Communities, their Member States, and the Russian Federation. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A21997A1128%2801%29>.

¹⁵ Antonenko, O. & Pinnick, K. (2005). Russia and the European Union: Prospects for a New Relationship. O'Brennan, J. (2006). The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union.

process.¹⁶ The book “EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation” by Anne-Sophie Maass instead delves into the Russian and European perspective, starting from the first Putin presidency.¹⁷

On the other hand, scholars have paid less attention to studying the long-term impacts on European foreign policy in relation to the exclusion of Russia from the fifth enlargement process. As there is an important gap in the current literature, the purpose of this study is to provide a critical analysis of the strategic missteps made in 2004. Furthermore, the study draws on literature collected from notable academic research to develop a scientific argument and frame it within a comprehensive and wide-ranging reflection. This dissertation analyzes the missed opportunity of the Union to engage Russia in a closer partnership grounded in shared values and principles. In this regard, it is imperative to analyze the process that led to the fifth enlargement. From a methodological standpoint, the thesis relies on qualitative data, combining primary sources such as official EU documents, academic sources, and speeches by political leaders with secondary academic literature, mainly in relation to the contemporary perceptions of the fifth enlargement and the views of the European institutions. Russian sources are used to complement the European perspective. At the same time, a historical and institutional methodological analysis guides the reconstruction of the enlargement process, describing the process that led to the fifth enlargement and the EU-Russia relations in the 1990s and early 2000s.

The remainder of this thesis proceeds as follows. Firstly, the research will provide a historical overview of the relations between Brussels and Moscow after the USSR’s collapse, examining how this collaboration evolved. Secondly, it will focus on the history of the fifth enlargement from the Union’s perspective, particularly highlighting the visions of the Commissions led by Delors, Santer, and Prodi. Then, the third chapter will analyze the Russian view on the Union and NATO expansion, detailing how this perspective evolved from Yeltsin to Putin, leading to the invasion of Georgia in 2008.¹⁸

¹⁶ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution.

¹⁷ Maass, A.-S. (2017). EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation. London: Routledge.

¹⁸ Svante, E. C. & al. (2008). Russia’s War in Georgia: Causes and Implications for Georgia and the War. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program. https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2008_08_PP_CornellPopjanevskiNillson_Russia-Georgia.pdf.

Subsequently, it will retrospectively examine the fifth enlargement, analyzing the missteps made by the Union during the process. The last chapter also addresses the themes of potential subsequent EU enlargements. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the findings of the thesis and presents suggestions for further areas of study.

Chapter I: EU-Russia relations in the 1990s and early 2000s

1.1: The relationship between the European Union and Russia in the early 1990s

The year 2004 marked a significant step in European history, as the European Union completed its most important and ambitious enlargement process since its creation.¹⁹ The Union welcomed ten new states into its family, including the Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia, which belong to the eastern region of the European continent, to which were added the islands of Cyprus and Malta.²⁰ This epochal turning point forever changed the economic and political developments among the member states, but it also had significant implications for the nations adjacent to the new European borders.

To more effectively understand the process of the fifth enlargement of the European Union, it is necessary to comprehend and deepen the dynamics between the Union and Russia, starting from the early 1990s.²¹ In fact, this historical period has shaped the structure and interactions of these actors, impacting the expansion process. At the time of the enlargement, the Russia-EU border was solid, with both sides planning to increase the number of trade exchanges with countries in Central and Eastern Europe.²²

Already during the first years of Gorbachev, relations between Brussels and Moscow improved in discontinuity with the years of the Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko presidencies.²³ This change is due to “New Thinking,” Gorbachev's slogan for a foreign policy based on shared moral and ethical principles to solve global problems. Together with the domestic policies of *Glasnost* (transparency) and *Perestroika* (restructuring), aimed at opening the country and reviving it economically, these three policies changed the international perception of the Soviet Union. Soviet relations with Europe started to improve significantly in this historical phase, mainly by virtue of the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in December 1987.²⁴ Moreover, the USSR was experiencing a severe economic crisis during these years, and the Union

¹⁹ O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. Abingdon: Routledge. p. 1.

²⁰ European Union (2025). *EU Enlargement*. https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en.

²¹ O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. p. 156.

²² *Ibid.* p. 138.

²³ Glenn E. C. (1996). *New Thinking: Foreign Policy under Gorbachev*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress. <https://countrystudies.us/russia/17.htm>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

was primarily seen as a necessary financial and commercial partner.²⁵ This dependency accelerated the diplomatic rapprochement between the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) and the European Union, as the Soviet Union sought economic and financial support from the European states.

In 1988, a declaration of mutual recognition between COMECON and the European Community marked a significant shift in their relations.²⁶ Prior to this date, the Union had not been recognized, neither during the times of Stalin nor Khrushchev, as it was perceived as an instrument of US-led capitalist imperialism. After fifteen years of unofficial contacts and negotiations, on June 25, 1988, the representatives of the parties met in Luxembourg and signed a Declaration establishing that the Parties should “develop cooperation in areas which fall within their respective spheres of competence, and there is a common interest.”²⁷ The first cooperation agreement between the EU and the USSR was signed only in 1989, a few years before the dissolution of the Soviet bloc.²⁸ In addition, the Soviet acceptance of the collapse of the communist regimes in Europe in the two years 1989-1990 improved the relations between the parties even further.²⁹ 1989 also marked the initiation of the PHARE program, which aimed to support the Central and Eastern European countries transitioning from communism.³⁰

In a speech by Gorbachev to the Council of Europe in July 1989, he underlined “the sovereign right of each people to choose their social system.”³¹ This declaration, in apparent discontinuity with the Brezhnev Doctrine, was a clear signal of the end of the USSR's control over its satellite countries, showing the first signs of disintegration. The two definitive signs of the dissolution of the Soviet Union were the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the dissolution of COMECON in January 1991, and the definitive dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 31, 1991.³²

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ European Union (1988). Signing of the EC/COMECON joint declaration. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_88_97.

²⁷ Grzybowski, K. (1990). The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the European Community. *The American Journal of International Law*, 84(1), 284–292. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2203032>.

²⁸ European Union (1989). EU law Agreement between the EEC and the EAEC and the URSS on trade and commercial and economic cooperation. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/45079ca2-c6c3-4d49-be49-1a696201b07e/language-en>.

²⁹ Glenn E. C. (1996). *New Thinking: Foreign Policy under Gorbachev*.

³⁰ European Parliament (1998). The PHARE Programme and the enlargement of the European Union. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/enlargement/briefings/33a1_en.htm.

³¹ Glenn E. C. (1996). *New Thinking: Foreign Policy under Gorbachev*.

³² Ibid.

1992 was a very critical and changing year for both Russia and the European Union. In fact, with the new year, Boris Yeltsin was elected President of the newly created Russian Federation.³³ His presidency also saw the emergence of new, closer relations with Western countries and the European Union, marking a new chapter in the history between Europe and Russia.³⁴ At the same time, 1992 was also the year in which the Union signed the Maastricht Treaty, sanctioning the official birth of the European Union, which succeeded the European Economic Community.³⁵ Initially, the Russian reaction to the signing of the Maastricht Treaty was one of concern, fearing that the integration of the countries belonging to the former Soviet bloc into the European Union could marginalize the Kremlin's influence in Europe.³⁶ However, the relations with the European Union remained collaborative in the months following the Treaty of Maastricht, continuing the positive trend of improving the relations between the two parties.

Additionally, alongside the ongoing process of enlargement of the Union, the topic of expanding the Atlantic Alliance into the post-Soviet space began to be discussed at the North Atlantic Council summit in Brussels in January 1994.³⁷ For the European Union, NATO enlargement was seen as an important space of cooperation with Moscow, capable of guaranteeing European security within a framework of coexistence and collaboration. A key difference between the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union is the membership, with the United States being a member of NATO but not of the EU. This distinction highlights the different priorities of the two organizations. In the first case, NATO was born as a defensive alliance to guarantee peace on the European continent and prevent a nuclear conflict on European soil, focusing on collective defense and military

³³ Savranskaya, S. & Blanton, T. (2021). The End of the Soviet Union 1991. National Security Archive. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2021-12-21/end-soviet-union-1991>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ European Parliament (2012). Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)/Treaty of Maastricht. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/maastricht-treaty>.

³⁶ Bordachev, T. (2019). Russia and Europe: A Problem of Strategic Intentions. Valdai. <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/russia-and-europe-problem-of-strategic-intentions/>.

³⁷ Council on Foreign Relations (2023). What actually happened with NATO enlargement in 1994? <https://education.cfr.org/learn/simulation/nato-enlargement-1994-nsc/what-actually-happened#:~:text=The%20accession%20of%20the%20Czech,wishing%20to%20join%20the%20alliance>.

cooperation.³⁸ In the second case, the European community emphasizes economic integration, political collaboration, and social cohesion among its members.³⁹

As highlighted by historian Bohdan Tierokhin, the question arises, therefore, whether the two alliances are still identifiable in the same way for Moscow or whether the European Union is an entity external to NATO.⁴⁰⁴¹ Russian politicians and diplomats did not view the enlargement of the European Union in the 1990s with suspicion, unlike their view of the Atlantic Alliance.⁴² The Kremlin's negative perception stems from the events of the twentieth century. The Cold War divided Europe for several decades, and the borders between the Atlantic and Soviet blocs delineated the division of "us" against "you."⁴³ In parallel with the improvement of relations between the Union and Russia, first with Gorbachev and then with Yeltsin, the European Union began the process of rapprochement with the countries of the post-Soviet area. The result was the overlapping of European and Russian interests in these areas; without ever having defined them later, the influence of the first or the second part could extend.⁴⁴

The European Union's relationship with Russia entered a new phase of collaboration in June 1994. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) was defined by the European Council in Corfu, focusing on economic and trade issues between Russia and the European Union.⁴⁵ Specifically, the agreement framework provides respect for democracy, the principles of international law, and human rights.⁴⁶ Moreover, this agreement strengthened economic ties with the goal of creating a free trade

³⁸ Total Military Insight (2024). Understanding NATO and Collective Defense: A Strategic Overview. <https://totalmilitaryinsight.com/nato-and-collective-defense/>.

³⁹ Begg, I. (2021). The European Union and regional economic integration. European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689369/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)689369_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689369/EPRS_BRI(2021)689369_EN.pdf).

⁴⁰ Tierokhin, B. (2024). Russia's Perception of NATO Enlargement and the Challenges to its Great Power Identity. Foreign Affairs Review. <https://www.foreignaffairsreview.com/home/russias-perception-of-nato-enlargement-and-the-challenges-to-its-great-power-identity>.

⁴¹ Blank, S. J. (1998). European Security and NATO Enlargement: A View from Central Europe. US Army War College. <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1858&context=monographs>.

⁴² Bordachev, T. (2019). Russia and Europe: A Problem of Strategic Intentions.

⁴³ Antonenko, O. & Pinnick, K. (2005). Russia and the European Union: Prospects for a New Relationship. London: Routledge. p. 15.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 15.

⁴⁵ European Union (1994). Consolidated version of the Agreement on partnership and cooperation establishing a partnership between the European Communities, their Member States, and the Russian Federation. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A21997A1128%2801%29>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

area based on the principles of trade liberalization and the most favored nation status, developing a political dialogue to promote the stability and security of the European continent through the organization of summits and regular meetings.⁴⁷ However, the ratification of the PCA slowed down over the decade due to delays caused by the war in Chechnya, which started in 1994.⁴⁸ For this reason, the PCA entered into force only in December 1997.⁴⁹

In conclusion, the first years of the relationship between the European Union and Russia were beneficial for both parties as Brussels and Moscow got closer to each other through the PCA.⁵⁰ The good neighborly relationship between the Russian Federation and the European Union is the basis of the stability of the European continent. In this phase, after the decades of the Cold War, the evolution of the relationship suggested a further rapprochement of the parties in the following years, mainly in the economic sector, leading to significant stability on the European continent.

1.2 EU-Russia dialogue in the late 1990s

In the second part of the 1990s, Russia and the European Union continued their process of rapprochement. In this phase, Yeltsin tried to integrate more with Western markets by supporting Russia's transition from a planned economy to a market economy.⁵¹ In fact, the European Union was Russia's leading trading partner.⁵² The relationship with Brussels could represent an opportunity to reduce unemployment and economic inequalities and, at the same time, move forward with the privatization process of Russian industries.⁵³

On January 1, 1995, the European Union concluded its fourth enlargement, introducing Austria, Finland, and Sweden, expanding its market in northern Europe, and

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Government of Canada (2022). Russia's 1994-96 campaign for Chechnya: A failure in shaping the battlespace. <https://www.canada.ca/en/army/services/line-sight/articles/2022/02/russias-1994-96-campaign-for-chechnya-a-failure-in-shaping-the-battlespace.html>.

⁴⁹ European Union (2020). Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs): Russia, the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/partnership-and-cooperation-agreements-pcas-russia-the-southern-caucasus-and-central-asia.html?fromSummary=07>.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Lynch, A.C. (2002). The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s. p. 171.

⁵² Glenn E. C. (1996). New Thinking: Foreign Policy under Gorbachev.

⁵³ Lieven, D. & Vodovozov, S. A. (2025). The Yeltsin presidency (1991-99). Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Russia>.

continuing to consolidate its economic relations with Moscow.⁵⁴ In fact, the conclusions of the Madrid European Council of December 1995 highlighted that: “Good relations between the EU and a democratic Russia are essential to stability in Europe. The EU is therefore committed to establishing a substantial partnership with Russia in order to promote the democratic and economic reform process, to enhance the respect of human rights, to consolidate peace, stability, and security in order to avoid new dividing lines in Europe, and to achieve the full integration of Russia into the community of free and democratic nations. The PCA provides a firm basis on which to build such relations with Russia.”⁵⁵ This declaration emphasizes the good neighborly relations between the two parties at this stage, mainly through a rapprochement in the economic field.

Furthermore, in the conclusions of the Madrid European Council, it is noted that the Union supports “the further development of democracy, the rule of law and pluralism in Russia” and the “early Russian membership of the Council of Europe,” which will take place in 1996.⁵⁶ Continuing, “The EU should encourage [...] the creation as foreseen in the PCA of the necessary conditions for the future establishment of a free trade area between the Community and Russia covering substantially all trade in goods between them, as well as conditions for bringing about freedom of establishment of companies, of cross-border trade in services and of capital movements” and “the progressive integration between Russia and a wider area of cooperation in Europe.”⁵⁷

The following year, in February 1996, the Interim Agreement between the Union and Russia entered into force to allow the implementation of the commercial provisions of the PCA before its complete ratification, and to continue the economic and political cooperation between the parties.⁵⁸ In April 1996, the Union also adopted the “European Union action plan for Russia, remarking on the conclusions of the Madrid European Council of the previous year as the European Union was “committed to establishing a

⁵⁴ European Union (2025). EU Enlargement.

⁵⁵ European Parliament (1995). Madrid European Council 15 and 16 December 1995 Presidency conclusions. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/mad3_en.htm.

⁵⁶ Council of Europe (2022). The Russian Federation is excluded from the Council of Europe. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/the-russian-federation-is-excluded-from-the-council-of-europe#:~:text=Russia%20joined%20the%20Council%20of%20Europe%20on%2028%20February%201996>.

⁵⁷ European Parliament (1995). Madrid European Council 15 and 16 December 1995 Presidency conclusions.

⁵⁸ European Union (1996). Resolution on the failure to consult Parliament on the EU-Russia Interim Agreement. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:51996IP0111>.

substantial partnership with Russia in order to promote the democratic and economic reform process, to enhance respect for human rights, to consolidate peace, stability, and security in order to avoid new dividing lines in Europe and to achieve the full integration of Russia into the community of free and democratic nations.”⁵⁹ In this plan, the need for “Ratification as soon as possible of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement” and “strengthen[ing] cooperation and commercial links with Russia in the context of its transition to a market economy” was highlighted.⁶⁰ Ratification of the PCA would take place the following year, in December 1997, officially institutionalizing a regular dialogue on political and economic issues between Brussels and Moscow.⁶¹

Approaching the late 1990s, while economic relations between the two parties remained constructive, some issues arose from the Russian side concerning its foreign policy towards the Union.⁶² Indeed, the Russian vision of the European Union was inherited from the view of the USSR. Consequently, Russian foreign policy doctrine has favored bilateral relations over multilateral ones, which is why it was difficult for Moscow to see the European Union as an equal partner in dialogue.

Several factors contributed to this situation. Firstly, at an institutional level, the initial meetings between European heads of state and Moscow were characterized by a bilateral nature.⁶³ Indeed, they were held between individual countries and Russia rather than involving the European Union as a whole. The lack of a unified representation made it challenging to establish a consistent and cohesive dialogue between the two parties. As a result, this fragmented approach hindered the creation of clear interlocutors between Moscow and Brussels.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, inheriting the Soviet structure, was built in the 1990s to relate only bilaterally with the states and not to renew itself by including a department devoted only to the European Union.⁶⁴ For this reason, the lack of direct cooperation between the Union and Russia stems from the

⁵⁹ CVCE (1996). Action Plan on the future relations with Russia (26 April 1996). https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/action_plan_on_the_future_relations_with_russia_26_april_1996-en-0a6a8ed8-d5cc-4ac7-9fd0-264dc06382ef.html.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ European Union (2020). Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs): Russia, the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia.

⁶² Antonenko, O. & Pinnick, K. (2005). Russia and the European Union: Prospects for a New Relationship. p.52.

⁶³ Ibid. p. 52.

⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 53.

traditional constitution of the Kremlin's foreign affairs ministry. This misinterpretation of Russia led Moscow diplomats and politicians to start to think in a distorted way about the Union's objectives regarding the enlargement process.

In August 1998, the Russian economy was hit by a severe financial crisis as a consequence of the government-set exchange rate, which did not reflected the country's economic productivity.⁶⁵ As a result, the ruble collapsed, and the Russian government was forced to devalue its currency due to financial instability.⁶⁶ For this reason, it became essential for Russia to improve its economic relations with Brussels. Parallel to the economic crisis in 1999, a political crisis was triggered between Brussels and Moscow concerning the management of the Balkan crisis.⁶⁷ Indeed, almost all the countries of the European Union are part of the Atlantic Alliance, which, at the end of the 1990s, intervened in Kosovo despite Moscow's opposition. The Kremlin heavily criticized the NATO intervention of March 1999, considering the episode a violation of Serbia's sovereignty and an attempt to expand its influence in the Balkans.⁶⁸ NATO's intervention in Kosovo began to fuel foreign policy tensions between the European Union and the Russian Federation, which from then on would weigh on relations between the two parties in the long term.

However, despite the political crisis due to the Kosovo War, the relationship between the European Union and Russia remained solid. In June 1999, the European Council approved the Common Strategy on Russia in Cologne, with the aim of defining a shared European vision for relations with the Russian Federation.⁶⁹ The objectives of the agreement included the consolidation of democracy and the rule of law in Russia, the integration of Moscow into the European economic and social space, the increase of security and stability in Europe, and the fight against organized crime and environmental risks.⁷⁰ A second central element of the strategy was the integration of Russia into the “European family” according to European values, envisaging a Russia “stable, open and

⁶⁵ Lieven, D. & Vodovozov, S. A. (2025). The Yeltsin presidency (1991-99).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ingimundarson, V. (2022). The “Kosovo Precedent”: Russia’s justification of military interventions and territorial revisions in Georgia and Ukraine. LSE Ideas. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/2022-SU-Valur-RussKosovo.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ European Union (1999). Common Strategy of the European Union on Russia. <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/38943c06-7e5d-4ca3-acc3-c5154bd9c04e/language-en>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

pluralistic democracy [...] governed by the rule of law and underpinning a prosperous market economy benefiting like all the people of Russia and the European Union.”⁷¹ Consequently, Russia would have to integrate important reforms in economic matters and compliance with the European rule of law, emphasizing closer coordination between the EU institutions and Russia.⁷²

During the European Council in Helsinki in December 1999, Vladimir Putin, then Prime Minister, presented the document *The Medium-Term Strategy for the Development of Relations between the Russian Federation and the EU (2000-10)*.⁷³ The strategy conveyed Russia's view of the European Union, promoting cooperation between Moscow and Brussels in crisis management to “counterbalance, inter alia, the NATO-centrism in Europe.”⁷⁴ The relationship between Russia and the Union, therefore, had to evolve from the Kremlin's point of view, as “the development of partnership with the EU should contribute to consolidating Russia's role as a leading power in shaping up a new system of interstate political and economic relations in the CIS area.”⁷⁵

Additionally, at the European Council in Helsinki, member states of the Union agreed to start negotiations with new Eastern European countries: Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, and Slovakia, continuing the process of the fifth enlargement.⁷⁶ A few days later, after the Council held in Helsinki, the Russian Federation changed its President for the first time.⁷⁷ On December 31, 1999, Vladimir Putin, former Prime Minister under Yeltsin, became President of the Russian Federation.⁷⁸ With Putin's election, a phase of change began, and the dawn of the new millennium marked a transformation in relations between Russia and the Union. Russia sought legitimacy from the European Union and its members following the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁷⁹ This identity reconfiguration was reflected in Russia's growing alignment with European

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Lynch, D. (2004). *Russia's Strategic Partnership with Europe*. European Union Institute for Security Studies. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/analy077.pdf>. p. 103.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. p. 90.

⁷⁷ Lieven, D. & Vodovozov, S. A. (2025). *The Yeltsin presidency (1991-99)*.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Splidsboel-Hansen, F. (2002). *Russia's Relations with the European Union: A Constructivist Cut*. *International Politics*, 39(4), pp. 399-421. p. 416.

democratic values. At the same time, the European Union showed a growing willingness to recognize Russia as part of the broader European value system.⁸⁰

In conclusion, the notion of a “European destiny” for Russia gradually gave way to the idea of cooperation and collaboration, but not full integration.⁸¹ During the 1990s, the prevailing view within the EU was that Russia, like other post-communist European countries, might eventually become part of the European Union without articulating what exactly Russia’s membership or participation in the EU project would entail, as the prospect of Russia actually joining the EU was not seriously entertained.⁸²

Instead, the European Union offered Russia a form of affiliation through the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, ratified in 1997, which became the main framework for Russia-EU relations.⁸³ Under this model, Russia was supposed to align itself with the reforms pursued by countries seeking full-fledged membership in the European Union, yet without having the actual prospects of accession.⁸⁴ As stated by the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, the Union was prepared to “share everything but institutions” with Russia.⁸⁵ This phrase captured the limited nature of the proposed integration. Consequently, Russia was expected to adhere to most EU norms and commitments without being offered the possibility of full membership.

1.3 Divergent paths between Brussels and Moscow in the early 2000s

The end of the twentieth century was a time of change at the top of both Russian and European leadership. With the election of Romano Prodi as President of the European Commission and the succession of Vladimir Putin as President of the Russian Federation, a new phase in the relations between Brussels and Moscow began.⁸⁶ Indeed, in continuity with the fruitful collaboration in the late 1990s, the political dialogue between Russia and the EU continued during the early years of the twenty-first century. Regular consultations

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 416.

⁸¹ Lukyanov, F.A. (2020). Russia-EU: Collaboration, Cohabitation, but Not Integration. Russia in Global Affairs. <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/russia-eu-not-integration/>.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ European Union (1994). Consolidated version of the Agreement on partnership and cooperation establishing a partnership between the European Communities, their Member States, and the Russian Federation.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Prodi, R. (2002). Proximity Policy as the key to stability “Peace, Security And Stability International Dialogue and the Role of the EU.” Sixth ECSA-World Conference. Jean Monnet Project. Brussels, 5-6 December 2002. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_02_619.

⁸⁶ Lieven, D. & Vodovozov, S. A. (2025). The Yeltsin presidency (1991-99).

between the two partners, through diplomats and biannual summits, allowed them to stay updated on their respective ideas and strategies in the economic, political, and security spheres.⁸⁷

Special mention is to be made of the issue of nuclear safety and disarmament, in which cooperation between the parties has been very productive. Both parties have supported the multilateral arms control and disarmament agreements, as underlined by the attention to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.⁸⁸ In this regard, in December 1999, the Union approved a joint action to establish a Cooperation Programme for the Non-Proliferation Treaty and Disarmament in Russia.⁸⁹ The commitment to this issue was also reaffirmed in June 2002 at the G8 in Kananaskis, Canada, with the EU's promise of one billion euros to safeguard and prevent the spread of nuclear waste material in Russia over the decade.⁹⁰

In the early 2000s, the two sides also found fertile ground for cooperation in the fight against terrorism.⁹¹ After the attacks of 9/11, the EU and Russia intensified the exchange of information, with the normalization of meetings between the Russian and EU Justice and Home Affairs Ministers becoming routine.⁹² The Kremlin has also shown itself in favor of increasing areas of cooperation in the military and technical field, for example, through Moscow's proposal to grant the EU the possibility of using satellite imagery to enhance the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP).⁹³ However, the parties have not established any further collaboration on this matter. Furthermore, both sides consolidated their bonds to stabilize the Balkan area after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. For instance, in 2002, the possibility of Russia's participation in the European Union Police Mission (EUPM) in Bosnia emerged.⁹⁴ In this regard, the civilian mission,

⁸⁷ Antonenko, O. & Pinnick, K. (2005). *Russia and the European Union: Prospects for a New Relationship*. p.25.

⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 27.

⁸⁹ European Union (1999). Council Decision establishing a European Union Cooperation Programme for Non-proliferation and Disarmament in the Russian Federation. *Official Journal of the European Communities*, L331, pp. 11-16. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:1999:331:0011:0016:EN:PDF>.

⁹⁰ G7 (2002). *The Kananaskis Summit Chair's Summary*. <https://g7g20-documents.org/database/document/2002-g7-canada-leaders-leaders-language-the-kananaskis-summit-chairs-summary>.

⁹¹ Antonenko, O. & Pinnick, K. (2005). *Russia and the European Union: Prospects for a New Relationship*. p. 116.

⁹² Ibid. p. 27.

⁹³ Ibid. p. 69.

⁹⁴ Lynch, D. (2004). *Russia's Strategic Partnership with Europe*.

launched in 2003, highlighted Russia's willingness to work under an EU command in the Balkans.⁹⁵

In September 2002, Patten and Solana presented to the European Council a plan to include in the future aims of the Union Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine, defined as "Western Newly Independent States," creating the so-called "ring of friends," as proposed by the President of the European Commission Romano Prodi.⁹⁶ With the "Wider Europe – New Neighborhood" update in March 2003, Russia was included in the project, demonstrating the Union's interest in creating a further mechanism for interacting with Russia.⁹⁷ This programmatic document aimed to ensure European political stability in Eastern Europe, economic development, and poverty reduction in a spirit of collaboration between the parties.⁹⁸ However, the situation displeased the Kremlin. Indeed, due to its historical and economic importance, Moscow did not want to be paired with other less influential post-Soviet states. Moreover, for the Russian government, this situation was unsatisfactory after the European Union declared that it would build a "strategic partnership" and not a "special partnership" together, not providing security guarantees deemed sufficient by Moscow.⁹⁹

Following this discontent, on a strategic level, Russia thought of the concept of "common space" as a positive alternative to Wider Europe.¹⁰⁰ The idea was finalized at the St. Petersburg summit in May 2003, establishing four "common spaces" between the two parties: a common economic space, a space of common freedom, security, and space, a common space for research and education, and lastly, a common space for external security.¹⁰¹ In particular, regarding the common space for external security, the parties agreed to strengthen their cooperation in addressing global challenges and crisis

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Dangerfield, M. (2007). The European Union and Post-Communist Europe: One Approach or Several? *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 23(4), 478–500. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523270701674566>.

⁹⁷ European Commission (2003). Wider Europe — Neighbourhood: Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament. <https://aei.pitt.edu/38141/>.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Antonenko, O. & Pinnick, K. (2005). Russia and the European Union: Prospects for a New Relationship. p. 155.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 105.

¹⁰¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2003). EU-Russia Summit - St. Petersburg, 31 May 2003 - joint statement. https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1603075/?TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817ab2000bc26af99d3fdf5a4fa1002d0c448033da244c9ac6add902c88eff1b5c28ea90a087f645049143000ec7d6c1a877e6a635310ed744214666526f6946d4381500e1e30c8841bedd3b6c75aac745b966061dc41e11c7904423a.

management.¹⁰² With this meeting, the Union and Russia, therefore, established a strengthening of their strategic partnership and greater coordination in foreign policy.

Another important point in the relations between Russia and Europe concerns the harmonization of the dynamics and opinions of the leaders within the Union. At the EU-Russia Summit in Rome in November 2003, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi granted amnesty to the Moscow government regarding its actions in Chechnya and the arrest of the leader of “Open Russia” Mikhail Khodorkovsky, contravening the position of the Union, claiming that the media misrepresented the truth in parallel with his clash with the Italian authorities over allegation of corruption.¹⁰³ Moreover, President Berlusconi, who represented the European Union through its rotating presidency, committed the Union to support Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization and mentioned the possibility of removing visas for Russians entering the European Union.

The President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, clashed with the intervention of the Italian Prime Minister, declaring that he was surprised that President Berlusconi was better informed about the Russian situation than the Italian one.¹⁰⁴ In particular, this event highlighted how, in the early 2000s, there were intense contradictions and tensions within the CFSP. For instance, French President Jacques Chirac in 2000 refused to meet Putin, calling Russian actions against Chechen dissidents outrageous.¹⁰⁵ The lack of a common position in the foreign policy of the European Union on this occasion confirmed the dissonance of the member states' perspectives on the Russian Federation.

In December 2003, the European Council held a meeting in Brussels to call for a review of the European Union's foreign policy towards Russia.¹⁰⁶ On that occasion, the European Council adopted the European Security Strategy (ESS), following the influence of High Representative Javier Solana, mindful of the desire to create a “strategic partnership” with Russia.¹⁰⁷ This document represented the lodestar of the European

¹⁰² European Commission (2003). Wider Europe — Neighbourhood: Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament.

¹⁰³ Horsley, J. (2003). Berlusconi breaks EU ranks on Russia. BBC News. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3249045.stm>.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ European Commission (2003). Wider Europe: Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament.

¹⁰⁷ European Union (2003). European Security Strategy. Brussels: European Council.

strategy. Among the words of the report, it is possible to read between the lines the trust that the European institutions placed in the enlargement and the vision of the future for the European continent: “Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure, nor so free. [...] The progressive spread of the rule of law and democracy has seen authoritarian regimes change into secure, stable, and dynamic democracies. Subsequent enlargements are making a reality of the vision of a united, peaceful continent.”¹⁰⁸ It was, therefore, expected that the process of expansion of the European Union would be a necessary step for stability and prosperity on the European continent. Even more interestingly, there was no mention of Russia in terms of threat or danger, underlining the positivity of European actors in building a relationship of trust and cooperation between Brussels and Moscow.

The issue of security has been central to European institutions, as balance in Europe is the founding pillar of the Union. During the years of the fifth enlargement, the institutions focused their attention outside the European borders, particularly on the threat of “more visibility, less visible, and less predictable.” Experts defined terrorism in these terms, especially after the attack on the Twin Towers and the identification of Al Qaeda as an enemy to eradicate. Added to these were the objective of countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the containment of regional conflicts, particularly in the Balkans, the support for failed states such as Somalia, Liberia, and Afghanistan, and finally, the fight against organized crime.¹⁰⁹

Continuing with the reading of the ESS, it is possible to note the thoughts of the Council regarding the expansion to the East: “The integration of accessing states increases our security but also brings the EU closer to troubled areas. Our task is to promote a ring of well-governed countries to the East of the European Union and on the borders of the Mediterranean with whom we can enjoy close and cooperative relations. [...] Through our concerted efforts with the US, Russia, NATO, and international partners, the stability of the region is no longer threatened by the outbreak of major conflict.” Moreover, the commitment to “continues working for closer relations with Russia, a major factor in our security and prosperity” emphasized the desire to strengthen ties with Russia, based on the “respect for common values will reinforce progress towards a strategic partnership.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Consequently, in January 2004, the Union renewed its foreign policy towards Russia for three main reasons: the impact of the fifth enlargement on the PCA, the concerns of the new member states about Russia's interference policies, and finally, the need for a more defined policy towards the Kremlin.¹¹¹ Therefore, the 1999 Common Strategy on Russia was abandoned.¹¹² The first impact of the new approach towards the Kremlin emerged from the EU-Russia summit in May 2004, when Russia agreed to extend the PCA to new members. In exchange, the EU supported Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization, agreeing to create a road map at the bilateral summit in November 2004 to define common spaces.¹¹³ Moreover, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) released by the Commission in May 2004, in parallel with the fifth enlargement, explicitly excluded Russia from the enlargement process, confirming that relations with Moscow from that moment would be managed solely through the framework of the common spaces, in agreement with Russia.¹¹⁴ The EU and Russia, more than a decade after the collapse of the USSR, have started to develop more conscious policies towards each other, overcoming the initial phase of uncertainty and improvisation of the early 1990s. On the one hand, the European Union has sought to progressively integrate the countries of Eastern Europe through the enlargement process; on the other hand, Russia has attempted to reassert its role in the post-Soviet space, perceiving the Union's moves as a challenge to its strategic interests.

In conclusion, in the early 2000s, despite the significant economic and political relations, the two parties had different interests while operating in the same geopolitical spaces, preferring to remain interdependent but independent. This disparity is evident in the unequal relationship between the two parties. For instance, in 2004, while Brussels could boast a collective population of around 450 million people, Moscow had less than a third of that, approaching approximately 145 million inhabitants.¹¹⁵ Economically, the

¹¹¹ Antonenko, O. & Pinnick, K. (2005). *Russia and the European Union: Prospects for a New Relationship*. p. 24.

¹¹² Ibid. p. 24.

¹¹³ European Commission (2004). First Summit between the enlarged EU and Russia. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_04_653.

¹¹⁴ European External Action Service (2004). European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-neighbourhood-policy_en#:~:text=The%20ENP%20was%20launched%20in,South%20and%20in%20the%20East.

¹¹⁵ European Council (2025). 2004 Enlargement: facts and figures. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/2004-enlargement-facts-and-figures/#:~:text=On%201%20May%202004%2C%20the,based%20on%20purchasing%20power%20>

difference was also substantial. The Union's nominal GDP, based on purchasing power parities, in 2004, accounted for over 21% of global GDP.¹¹⁶ Conversely, Russia's GDP in the same year was 634,724 million USD.¹¹⁷ In terms of GDP per capita, Russia ranked 78th out of 195 countries that year, highlighting the asymmetrical economic relationship between the parties.¹¹⁸ Consequently, Russia could not have an equal economic status comparable to that of the European Union.

In conclusion, the evolution of relations between the EU and Russia in the early 2000s revealed a systemic tension, with two actors who, although economically intertwined, remained distant in terms of values and strategy. The key lesson that emerged from the relationship between Brussels and Moscow is that economic interdependence alone is insufficient to ensure stability or foster political convergence. In the absence of a shared vision and a genuine political will to cooperate, even the most substantial economic ties remain precarious. The subsequent decades, marked by the tensions over Georgia and Ukraine, confirmed that these unresolved ambiguities laid the foundations for future areas of conflict.

parities). Macrotrends (2025). Russia Population 1950-2025. <https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/rus/russia/population>.

¹¹⁶ European Council (2025). 2004 Enlargement: facts and figures.

¹¹⁷ Countryeconomy (2004). Russia GDP – Gross Domestic Product. <https://countryeconomy.com/gdp/russia?year=2004>.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Chapter II: History of the “Big Bang” Enlargement from the Union perspective

2.1 Post-Cold War Enlargement during the Delors Commission (1989-1995)

Since the end of the 1980s, the European Union’s enlargement has not been merely a geopolitical expansion. However, it has also played a key role in shaping the Union’s institutional framework, strengthening the influence of the Commission and the Council, and amplifying the importance of its norms and values. In particular, the role of the Commission is pivotal as it has the task of coordinating and overseeing the enlargement process, both in terms of political negotiations and in ensuring compliance with the legal framework established by the European treaties.¹¹⁹ For instance, the Commission evaluates the progress of the dossiers of the candidate countries and negotiates the terms of accession. Furthermore, the Commission plays a key role in the design and implementation of institutional reforms to adapt the structure of European bodies and processes following an increase in the number of members.¹²⁰ In particular, as regards the fifth enlargement, three Commissions played a key role in the enlargement process: the Delors Commission (1985-1995), the Santer Commission (1995-1999), and the Prodi Commission (1999-2004).

Firstly, the Delors Commission was considered central to the evolution of European integration, underlining the importance and the leading role of the European Commission in the enlargement process.¹²¹ Elected President in 1985, the French politician assumed a prominent political role for the Union from the first months of his mandate, especially as a guide to the evolution of the European Community and proposing his genuine vision of how the European institutions should evolve.¹²² Thanks to its initiative and the support of the Franco-German axis under François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl, the Commission achieved extraordinary results. Mainly the creation of the single market starting from the Single European Act in 1986, the creation of the economic and monetary Union in 1992 with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, and the launch of

¹¹⁹ European Commission (2025). EU Enlargement. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-enlargement_en.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. Luxembourg: Publishing House of the European Union. p. 21.

¹²² Middelaar, L. (2012). Le passage à l’Europe: histoire d’un commencement. “Bibliothèque des idées” collection, Gallimard, Paris, p.61.

the most prominent enlargement process, which would have led to the entry of thirteen new states, in addition to East Germany, between 1995 and 2004. In fact, thanks to the numerous successes in Europe, the historical period of the Delors Commission is remembered as the “Golden Age” of the European Union.¹²³

1989 was a year of change in the European panorama. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 definitively marked the beginning of a new historical phase for the European continent.¹²⁴ Since the late 1980s, European institutional theorists have perceptively observed the change in the European order. For this reason, President Delors understood that planning the European integration project was necessary if the borders of the European Union were to expand.

In particular, two concepts guided European actors in this phase: deepening and widening.¹²⁵ Firstly, the concept of deepening refers to greater integration between the members of the Union, with the aim of creating a more harmonized and cohesive European Union.¹²⁶ The improvement of community institutions can be achieved through the expansion of their competencies and the strengthening of existing institutions. The Treaty of Maastricht (1992), the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997), and the Treaty of Nice (2001) are key examples of the willingness of the European institutions to intensify efforts to pursue the concept in the 1990s and early 2000s. Secondly, in parallel to the concept of deepening, the concept of widening envisaged the expansion of the European Union through the inclusion of new members, with the aim of promoting stability and prosperity on the European continent.¹²⁷ Although conceptually distinct and separate, these two processes have been deeply interconnected and frequently overlapped. Throughout the 1990s, the main challenge for the Union has been to strike a balance between deepening integration among existing member states and expanding membership to include new countries, ensuring that enlargement did not undermine the institutional cohesion of the Union.

¹²³ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. p. 19.

¹²⁴ Engel, J. A. (2011). The Fall of the Berlin Wall: The Revolutionary Legacy of 1989. Oxford University Press, United States.

¹²⁵ Gligorov, V. (2012). Deepening and widening the Europe. <https://pescanik.net/deepening-and-widening-the-europe/>.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

Also, in 1989, the PHARE¹²⁸ Program (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies) became a key instrument of the Union to assist the countries of Central and Eastern Europe in preparing to join the European mechanisms.¹²⁹ The PHARE, initially used with Poland and Hungary, worked through a system of non-repayable financing.¹³⁰ The objective of the program was to finance various projects in the beneficiary countries in the fields of economic, institutional, and infrastructural development.¹³¹ The aim was both to support economic and social cohesion projects and also to promote the adoption of the community *acquis* in the candidate countries.

Furthermore, the PHARE has also supported two other central financial instruments in the Agenda 2000 of the Santer Commission as instruments of pre-accession of the EU in view of the fifth enlargement: the ISPA (Instrument for Structural Policies for Pre-Accession), focused on financial support for projects relating to the environment and transport sectors and the SAPARD (Special Accession Program for Agriculture and Rural Development), focused on agricultural and rural development.¹³² Starting in May 1990, PHARE was extended to other central and eastern European countries.¹³³ PHARE guaranteed during the enlargement process central support to eight of the ten countries that entered the European mechanisms during the fifth enlargement: Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.¹³⁴

Lastly, in the same year, in April 1989, the report on “Economic and Monetary Union in the European Community,” better known as the Delors Report, launching the process of monetary and economic integration, was submitted by the Delors Committee.¹³⁵ This report highlighted the important political weight that the Commission had at the time, mainly how the figure of Delors was decisive for the evolution of the community institutional system. The Delors Report was approved in June 1989 at the

¹²⁸ French term meaning “lighthouse.”

¹²⁹ European Parliament (1998). The PHARE Programme and the enlargement of the European Union. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/enlargement/briefings/33a1_en.htm.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² European Union (2007). Instrument for structural policy for pre-accession. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/instrument-for-structural-policy-for-pre-accession.html>.

¹³³ Gerbet, P. (2007). La construction de l'Europe. “U” Collection, Armand Collin, Paris, p.374.

¹³⁴ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. p. 529.

¹³⁵ European Central Bank (2025). The Delors Committee (1988-89). <https://www.ecb.europa.eu/ecb/history-arts-culture/archives/delors/html/index.en.html#:~:text=The%20Delors%20Committee%20submitted%20its,of%20monetary%20and%20economic%20integration>.

Madrid European Council.¹³⁶ In 1992, this document served as the conceptual basis for the stipulation of one of the pillars of the European Union, which would launch the process of economic and monetary integration: the Maastricht Treaty. The plan for the creation of the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) was divided into several stages. Firstly, it envisaged the participation of member countries in the European Monetary System and the convergence of economic policies. Secondly, it required the creation of a European monetary institute in Frankfurt starting in 1994, which would be responsible for economic and monetary convergence. Furthermore, with the Maastricht Treaty, on February 7, 1992, it was decided to adopt the Euro irreversibly.¹³⁷

In addition to the creation of an Economic and Monetary Union, the Maastricht Treaty introduced other historic innovations for the European Union. First, the treaty formally established the European Union, evolving the European Economic Community into a more institutionally integrated community. Secondly, the Maastricht Treaty established the three pillars of the Union: the European Community, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA). Thirdly, the principle of subsidiarity was introduced, according to which the decisions of the Union should be made as close as possible to the citizens, except in cases in which they can be managed more efficiently at the central level. In parallel, the Maastricht Treaty strengthened the powers of the European Parliament, improving democratic representation. Moreover, European citizenship was introduced, allowing European citizens the freedom to work and reside freely in other countries of the Union.¹³⁸ Of particular importance, with the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, the role of the President of the European Commission increased in scope. This position was established with the Treaty of Rome in 1957; ideally, the leader of the European Union, starting with the Maastricht Treaty, it was established that his mandate should have a maximum duration of five years and that his appointment should be linked to the elections of the European Parliament.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. p. 529.

¹³⁷ European Parliament (2012). Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)/Treaty of Maastricht. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/maastricht-treaty>.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

The Treaty of Maastricht, the most significant manifestation of the application of the concept of deepening, was accompanied in parallel by the desire also to pursue the objective of widening. In this regard, on July 24, 1991, the Commissioner for External Relations and Trade Policy, Andriessen, warned his colleagues by saying: “It may be supposed that by 1993 several requests for accession will have been added to the five the Community have already received. Its current form is not suited to a possible 20 or 25 Member States. It is politically difficult to choose from among candidates. However, there are, therefore, two possibilities. The first is to establish the mechanisms needed for a much larger Community as soon as possible, but those mechanisms are not envisaged in the Intergovernmental Conference. The second possibility is to tell certain candidate countries that the Community is not in a position to take them in at the moment, but that it will endeavor to foster the conditions needed to incorporate them.”¹⁴⁰

Andriessen's intervention anticipated Delors' vision on the question towards the end of his last mandate, for which: “With the current institutions, it would not be possible to manage a community of 20 Member states,” and “if the situation in Yugoslavia moves towards that country's dissolution.”¹⁴¹ The idea of the commissioners at the time was, therefore, that they would have proceeded with caution with the enlargement process, which should be multi-step to avoid an institutional shutdown. As a consequence, the creation of treaties regarding the restructuring of European mechanisms would have been a topic to be addressed by the Commission, which would have followed that of Delors. Meanwhile, Austria had already applied in July 1989, followed by Cyprus and Malta in 1990, Sweden in June 1991, Finland in March 1992, Switzerland in May 1992, and lastly Norway in November 1992.¹⁴²

In this regard, it is the conclusion of the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993, which had established the position of the European institutions on the issue of enlargement: “The European Council today agreed that the associated countries in Central and Eastern Europe that so desire shall become members of the EU. Accession will take place as soon as an associated country is able to assume the obligations of membership

¹⁴⁰ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. HAEC, COM (91), Minutes No 1070, part 2, meeting of 24 July 1991.

¹⁴¹ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. p. 28.

¹⁴² Ibid. p. 29.

by satisfying the economic and political conditions required.”¹⁴³ This declaration pointed to the need for countries willing to join the European Union to adhere to the Copenhagen criteria.¹⁴⁴

With the European Council in Copenhagen in 1993, the Union established the rules that define the suitability of a country to join the European Union, in line with Articles 6 and 49 of the Maastricht Treaty.¹⁴⁵ There are three main criteria to follow for candidate countries. Firstly, the political criterion, as these countries must demonstrate “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities.”¹⁴⁶ Secondly, there is the economic criterion, as it requires “a functioning market economy and the ability to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the EU.”¹⁴⁷ Lastly, there is the verification of membership capacity, as the candidates should have “the ability to take on the obligations of membership, including the capacity to effectively implement the rules, standards, and policies that make up the body of EU law (the “*acquis*”), and adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary Union.”¹⁴⁸

Verification that these criteria are respected comes from the European Commission, which annually publishes the progress made by the candidate countries in relation to the Copenhagen criteria. After the European Parliament approves the application, the Commission is entitled to provide technical and financial assistance to help candidate countries meet the requirements.¹⁴⁹ In any case, such rules are necessary to guarantee the political and economic stability of the Union, ensuring that new members are ready to integrate into the political and legal system of the European Union. There was, therefore, a desire to use a prudent approach with the Eastern European countries, requesting compliance with the Copenhagen criteria to proceed with the accession process.

¹⁴³ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. Presidency conclusions of the Copenhagen European Council, 21 and 22 June 1993, p.13. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21225/72921.pdf>.

¹⁴⁴ European Union (2025). Accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:accession_criteria_copenhagen.

¹⁴⁵ European Parliament (2012). Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)/Treaty of Maastricht.

¹⁴⁶ European Union (2025). Accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ European Parliament (2012). Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)/Treaty of Maastricht.

In this regard, the Commission played a decisive role in the choice of the countries that would take part in the fourth enlargement, together with East Germany, after the ratification of October 3, 1990, which sanctioned the reunification of the two Germanys.¹⁵⁰ In particular, the Commission focused on anticipating the accession of Austria, Finland, and Sweden, compared to the other countries of central and eastern Europe, in two aspects. The first was the European Economic Area (EEA) Agreement, which was offered to EFTA countries to facilitate entry into the single market.¹⁵¹ Secondly, the three countries shared a status of neutrality at the time, which would have discouraged the process of a common foreign and security policy, which was seen as a significant challenge by the Commission.¹⁵² For this reason, these countries were able to take part in the fourth enlargement of the European Union. This enlargement process ended on January 1, 1995.¹⁵³ It was the enlargement to the north, including Austria, Sweden, and Finland, the first enlargement since the end of the Cold War, with the Union reaching 15 members.

At the beginning of 1995, Delors' political experience as President of the Commission also ended. In fact, the Commission's term in office was synchronized with the end of the mandate of the European Parliament in January 1995, after ten years in the role of leader of the European Union.¹⁵⁴ With the conclusion of his presidency, the arduous challenge of his succession arose. Thus ended a decade full of historical events both for the European continent and for the European Union itself: the Union had reached a new level thanks to the French President, looking forward to the new challenges of the second half of the 1990s.

2.2 Enlargement challenges and the Santer Commission (1995-1999)

Jacques Santer became President of the European Commission on January 23, 1995.¹⁵⁵ The nomination of the former Prime Minister of Luxembourg was approved with just 260

¹⁵⁰ Frowein, J. A. (1992). The Reunification of Germany. *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 86, No. 1. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2203146>.

¹⁵¹ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). *History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution*. p. 515.

¹⁵² *Ibid.* p. 515.

¹⁵³ European Union (2025). *EU Enlargement*.

¹⁵⁴ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). *History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution*. p. 39.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 39.

MEPs, 238 votes against, and 23 abstentions, underlining the difficulty of finding a successor capable of carrying forward the agenda of Delors.¹⁵⁶ The message addressed by the Luxembourger to the European Parliament on the occasion of the presentation of his program in January 1995 underlined the importance of continuity in the process of strengthening the European Institution through his political program called “Agenda 2000,” which contained among the objectives of the Commission a view on the upcoming eastern enlargement of the European Union.¹⁵⁷

The Commission, led by Santer, slightly modified the strategy to be followed for the enlargement process. The new approach prioritized a step-by-step approach to enlargement. It prevailed in relation to the enlargement, employing a “pragmatic and prudent” strategy, as articulated by Jacques Santer himself in a 2006 interview.¹⁵⁸ To comprehend Santer's doctrine as outlined in Agenda 2000, one can refer to a statement by the President on March 2, 1995, presented to the European Parliament: “The decision has already been taken in principle: we shall be opening our arms to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It is not possible to conceive of Europe without them.”¹⁵⁹ In parallel with this declaration, the prerequisite of the European institutions to amend their institutional structure to proceed with the process of enlargement emerged.

In October 1997, the signature of the Treaty of Amsterdam marked the first practical attempt to reform the institutions in anticipation of subsequent enlargements.¹⁶⁰ The political decision-makers agreed that without adequate legislative provisions, the European institutional structure would be impeded from working effectively following the increase in the number of members. In particular, the concern of European decision-makers was in relation to the majority required for decisions requiring unanimity, as foreseen by the annex of the Treaty of Amsterdam entitled “Protocol on the Institutions

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 60.

¹⁵⁷ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. Session 1995-1996 – minutes in extension of the sessions 28 to 29 February 1996. Annex to the Official Journal of the European Communities: Debates of the European Parliament, No 4-476.

¹⁵⁸ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. Interview with Jacques Santer by Etienne Deschamps, 6 April 2006.

¹⁵⁹ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. Statement made by Jacques Santer to the European Parliament on relations with the countries of central and eastern Europe: 1994/95 Session – Report of proceedings from 28 February to 2 March 1995. Annex to the Official Journal of the European Communities: Debates of the European Parliament, No 4-458, pp. 63-65.

¹⁶⁰ European Parliament (1997). Treaty of Amsterdam. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/treaty-of-amsterdam>.

with the Prospect of Enlargement of the European Union.”¹⁶¹ Furthermore, a fundamental innovation introduced by the Treaty of Amsterdam was the introduction of the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Javier Solana has held this role since 1999 and has held it for the entire duration of the fifth enlargement.¹⁶² Solana had previously been general secretary of the Atlantic Alliance for one mandate, underlining how he was a crucial man for the enlargement process in Eastern Europe of both alliances.¹⁶³

In the negotiations following the adoption of the Treaty of Amsterdam, the most controversial element in relation to the fifth enlargement remained the evolution of the institutional and legislative structure of the European Union and the voting method, underlining the importance of structural preparation and a redistribution of powers necessary to welcome new members within the Union. As a consequence, the probability of paralysis in the mechanisms was higher in proportion to the increase in the number of members. More actors, more citizens, more responsibilities: if the preparation had not been adequate, there could have been a slowdown in the European mechanisms following the enlargement process.

At the same time, attention was drawn to the fact that without a ready and adequate structure to support enlargement, even the new countries could have found it challenging to adapt to European mechanisms.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, they would have needed a period of adjustment to be able to follow the flow of the European path, entering *media res* in community affairs and discussions. For instance, politicians and diplomats from the new countries needed to gain practical experience in the field to learn how European decision-making works. Intrinsically, actors had to be prepared for a slowdown in decision-making processes to incorporate and harmonize the policies of the new members due to enlargement. For this reason, the need for a functioning institutional structure was a priority for both old and new members.

After the signing of the Treaty of Amsterdam, the Santer Commission advanced on eastward expansion, underlining the necessary cooperation of Member States in this

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ EurActiv (2004). Solana to answer that “call from Kissinger.” <https://www.euractiv.com/section/defence/news/solana-to-answer-that-call-from-kissinger/>.

¹⁶⁴ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. p. 615.

process according to Agenda 2000.¹⁶⁵ As argued by Nikolaus van der Pas, head of the Enlargement Task Force from 1998 to 1999, during the Santer Commission: "Each country has made progress in the negotiations dependent on their national interests. For example, in the case of Romania, France said that we needed to move quickly. For the Baltic states, it was the Scandinavians who were pushing. For Poland, it was Germany. In the end, any precautions regarding the peace of the negotiations or to ensure that the countries were properly prepared no longer counted. The process was therefore led not so much by any rational logic but rather by the interests of the national states."¹⁶⁶ Indeed, in addition to the institutional dimension, the process of European integration was also influenced by the intergovernmental relations between European states.

For instance, to underline the importance of the member states in the enlargement process, there is a testimony of Jean-Claude Juncker, who, in an interview held in 2016, recounted an event that took place at the Luxembourg Summit in December 1997: "Chirac, who was very pro-Turkish, had doubts about the accession of Cyprus. He argued: "We must not, for all that, import into Europe an unresolved problem. You say not to Turkey; I say not to Cyprus. Kohl, the other heads of state and government, and I argued in favor of Cyprus's accession. However, Chirac did not back down, and he said that France would officially declare itself opposed to that enlargement at the end of the European Council. I decided that we ultimately needed a unified decision. After three hours of debate, Chirac finally agreed. We made the candidate countries wait for four hours for the lunch that should have begun at one o'clock, but it was put back at five o'clock at the European Investment Bank in Luxembourg. In the dining room, I arranged the seating so that Chirac would be sitting next to Glafkos Clerridis, the President of Cyprus. Chirac was absolutely furious, but afterward, there was total harmony."¹⁶⁷

In the mentioned European Council, held in Luxembourg in December 1997, it was approved the decision to open negotiations with the Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia, the so-called "Luxembourg group," provided that these countries implemented reforms to harmonize with the community *acquis*, a prerequisite for their

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. p. 492.

¹⁶⁶ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. Interview with Nikolaus van der Pas, August 18, 2017, p. 14.

¹⁶⁷ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. Interview with Jean-Claude Juncker, July 22, 2016, pp. 13-14.

accession to the Union.¹⁶⁸ On that occasion, the determination of which countries were to be included in the fifth enlargement began to crystallize. In the opinion of Alexander Italianer, future Secretary-General of the Commission: “In 1997, there was a whole debate in the Commission about how many countries should be recommended for the opening of negotiations. There were arguments, [...] but what is certain is that we ended up proposing more countries than we expected.”¹⁶⁹

A year later, at the European Council summit in December 1998, the Commission verified the progress made by the candidate countries. In March 1999, the Santer Commission ended its mandate prematurely due to a corruption scandal affecting some members of the Commission.¹⁷⁰ Due to the refusal of the French Commissioner Edith Cresson to resign, the Commission was forced to resign collectively. The *interim* President of the Commission was entrusted at that point to the Spanish vice-president Manuel Marin, who remained in office until Prodi's appointment in September 1999.¹⁷¹

Only in December 1999, a few months after the establishment of the Prodi Commission, at the European Council held in Helsinki, the member states decided to open negotiations with new Eastern European states: Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, and Slovakia, the so-called “Helsinki group.”¹⁷² The decisive impetus came from key figures, including Gunter Verheugen, Commissioner for Enlargement, and Hans von der Broek, head of the Enlargement Task Force, who firmly argued that the Union must guarantee access to these new members.¹⁷³

However, not all the candidates were considered at the same level of progress in relation to the enlargement. Indeed, the Commission believed that the entry of Bulgaria and Romania into the Union was premature, as underlined by van der Pas in an interview released in 2017: “When I toured the capitals of eastern Europe, I got the impression that

¹⁶⁸ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. p. 42.

¹⁶⁹ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. Interview with Alexander Italianer February 7, 2017, pp.15-17.

¹⁷⁰ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. p. 44.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. p. 44.

¹⁷² O'Brennan, J. (2006). The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. p. 41.

¹⁷³ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. p. 42.

most of them were perfectly capable of joining us, even if it would not be straightforward. When I went to Bulgaria and Romania, however, I did not have that impression."¹⁷⁴

In conclusion, the European institutions experienced an important evolution during the Santer Commission at the dawn of the 2000s, as highlighted by James Sperling's iconic book "Two Tiers or Two Speeds? The European Security Order and the Enlargement of the European Union and NATO."¹⁷⁵ The European actors questioned whether the Union would define itself in the early 2000s by two tiers of states, namely the assimilated and the unassimilated, or whether it would define itself by two speeds, with assimilated states holding differentiated membership in the Western institutions.¹⁷⁶ An increase in participants would have had both positive and negative effects. However, it was seen as necessary to increase the European market, strengthen the economic and financial sector, and ensure political stability in agreement with the states interested in becoming members.

2.3 The Prodi Commission and the Fifth Enlargement (1999-2004)

With the end of the Marin Commission in September 1999, Romano Prodi was elected President of the European Commission.¹⁷⁷ With the support of the Socialists and Christian Democrats, the new Commission enjoyed two vice-presidents: Neil Kinnock for Administrative Reform and Loyola de Palacio for Interinstitutional Relations and Administration. Among the key figures of the Prodi Commission were Gunter Verheugen, responsible for Enlargement; Eneko Landaburu, Head of the Enlargement DG; Javier Solana, High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy; and Chris Patten, responsible for External Relations.¹⁷⁸

One of the first political acts of President Prodi was opening the intergovernmental conference leading to the Treaty of Nice.¹⁷⁹ The theme of the enlargement was pivotal for the new Commission, as highlighted by his words on that occasion: "First, the question

¹⁷⁴ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. Interview with Nikolaus van der Pas, August 18, 2017, p.14.

¹⁷⁵ Sperling, J. (1999). Two tiers or two speeds? Manchester: Manchester University Press.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. p. 45.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ European Parliament (2001). Treaty of Nice. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/treaty-of-nice#:~:text=The%20aim%20of%20the%20Treaty,well%20as%20Cyprus%20and%20Malta.>

before us is enlargement [...]. Second, [...] I see no room for a second Intergovernmental Conference. We cannot countenance any leftovers from Nice. Third, [...] our goal must be to make the institutions work effectively and democratically with 27 or 28 members.”¹⁸⁰ After this speech, on February 26, 2001, the Commission signed the Treaty of Nice, realizing President Prodi's objective of strengthening the European Union in view of the fifth enlargement.¹⁸¹

The primary function of the Treaty of Nice was to reform the institutional structure of the Union in anticipation of the entry of new countries, strengthening both the legislative powers that control the Parliament and extending qualified majority voting to other areas within the Council.¹⁸² To allow new members to enter the Union, the Commission has guaranteed a fair margin of flexibility for the transition period, making the European Union two groups to speed up accession negotiations. In fact, the main objective of the countries that had applied to join the Union with member states was to speed up their accession to the European mechanisms. The need to accelerate the negotiations from the Union's perspective served to expand the community market.

Since the early 2000s, the European Commission's desire to guarantee a more significant acceleration of the integration process has supported the accession process. The “road map” followed by the Union for the fifth enlargement proceeded swiftly, with the Swedish Presidency starting from January 1, 2001, which aimed for the negotiation of the 31 "negotiating chapters" of the *acquis* by the end of 2002.¹⁸³ The role of the Persson Presidency was decisive for the practical realization of the fifth enlargement, showing great determination and providing a decisive impulse.¹⁸⁴ For instance, with the Gothenburg European Council of June 2001, the European Council declared the process of the fifth enlargement "irreversible" and that "the road map should make it possible to complete negotiations by the end of 2002 for those countries that were ready. The ratio is that they should participate in the European Parliament elections of 2004 as members."¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁰ Varsori, A. & al. (2019). History of European Commission 1986-2000. History and Memories of an Institution. Speech/00/40, 'Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission: Opening of the IGC', General Affairs Council, Brussels, 14 February 2000.

¹⁸¹ European Parliament (2001). Treaty of Nice.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ O'Brennan, J. (2006). The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. p. 66.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 66.

¹⁸⁵ O'Brennan, J. (2006). The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. European Council. Presidency Conclusions, Gothenburg, Bulletin of the European Union, EU-6 2001. P. 40.

In November 2001, the fourth annual enlargement report highlighted significant progress in the enlargement process, unifying the previous “Luxembourg” and “Helsinki” groups into the so-called “Laeken group.”¹⁸⁶ This group included the ten countries that would become part of the European Union starting in 2004: Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

The Union began the last round of accession negotiations in April 2002. This objective has been confirmed by the 2002 annual enlargement report, which stated that “the candidates should be ready to become members in 2004.”¹⁸⁷ The Danish presidency of the European Council played a key role in allocating the budget for the entry of new members. On November 26, 2002, the Danish chairmanship presented the draft “final package” to the ten candidate countries amid uncertainty regarding its acceptance by the former member states.¹⁸⁸ With the European Council summit in Copenhagen in December 2002, there was the last act of the negotiation process for the fifth enlargement. All the EU member states accepted all the states of the “Laeken group.” Newspapers across Europe celebrated the success of the event with headlines such as “Good morning, Europe!” and “A new Europe is born.”¹⁸⁹ The fifth enlargement was ready for finalization.

2003 was a transitional year for the enlargement process. The Accession Treaty was officially signed on April 16, 2003, in Athens, defined by the daily *Apoyevmatini* as a “contract of hope.”¹⁹⁰ German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder declared regarding the event: “With this step, the Union is finally overcoming the division of Europe into east and west [...] just like the Berlin Wall [in 1989] today it is a reason for shared joy – joy that we are creating a united and peaceful Europe.”¹⁹¹ Accompanying the treaty was a declaration signed by all 25 heads of state or government of the member states, which recognized the importance of enlargement in terms of security, establishing a solid basis in the Union for building a solid future based on cooperation, respect for diversity, and mutual understanding.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁶ O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. p. 41.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 42.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 47.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. p. 49.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 50.

¹⁹¹ O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. Quoted in the *Guardian*, April 18, 2003. For a detailed analysis of the content of the accession treaty, see also 'The terms of the accession treaty,' *European Report*, No. 2752, February 19, 2003, V.1–3.

¹⁹² O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. 'Athens Declaration issued as leaders sign Accession Treaty,' *European Report*, No. 2769, April 18, 2003, V.4–5.

Furthermore, 2003 was the year of the referendums for the ten future member countries. The most significant concern concerned the electoral turnout, which risked not being achieved, undermining the entry of these countries into the Union. Although there were apparent differences in terms of positive votes and turnout, all ten countries received the green light with their respective referendums (*see Table 1 below*).¹⁹³ Following the referendums, the new member states ratified the Accession Treaty to formalize membership.

Table 1: Results of EU accession referendums in Central and Eastern Europe¹⁹⁴

Country	Ref. Date	Yes (%)	No (%)	Turnout (%)
Malta	9 March 2003	53.65	46.35	91
Slovenia	23 March 2003	89.66	10.34	55
Hungary	12 April 2003	83.76	16.24	46
Lithuania	10-11 May 2003	89.92	10.08	64
Slovakia	16-May 2003	92.46	7.54	52
Poland	7-8 June 2003	77.45	22.55	59
Czechia	13-14 June 2003	77.33	22.67	55
Estonia	14 September 2003	66.92	33.08	63
Latvia	20 September 2003	67.7	32.3	73

After the signing of the Accession Treaty in Athens, a summit was held in Salonika in June 2003, during which prospects for future enlargement were already being discussed.¹⁹⁵ President Prodi's remarks were instrumental in affirming that: "Europe's unification will not be complete until the Balkan countries are members of the Union."¹⁹⁶ The objective was to keep Europeans' interest high so that a further phase of enlargement

¹⁹³ O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. p. 51.

¹⁹⁴ Cyprus did not hold a referendum on its accession to the European Union in 2004. However, in April 2004, a referendum was conducted on the Annan Plan for the unification of the island. While Turkish Cypriot community approved the plan, the Greek Cypriot community overwhelmingly rejected it. Consequently, the referendum did not pass but the country joined the Union on May 2004. Source: Wright, G. (2004). Greek Cypriot leaders reject Annan plan. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/apr/22/eu.cyprus>.

¹⁹⁵ O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. p. 51.

¹⁹⁶ O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. Quoted in the *Guardian*, June 23, 2003.

could proceed, with the prospect that Bulgaria and Romania would join the Union in the years to come.

The desire to maintain the momentum before the official entry of the ten new states was a priority of the Commission. The comprehensive monitoring report of November 2003 proceeded with the continuation of the evaluation and screening process, maintaining continuity with the work carried out in previous years.¹⁹⁷ The idea was that countries that were accessing the Union could incur problems during the implementation of the *acquis communautaire* in their legal systems. In this case, the Accession Treaty could trigger the safeguard clause. However, it was a matter of defining the final steps for the entry of the new ten members.

Finally, 2004 was the year of the fifth enlargement.¹⁹⁸ Finally, after years of discussions and compromises, the negotiation process of the most prolonged and most complex enlargement in the history of the Union had reached its conclusion. The Irish presidency symbolically hosted the enlargement celebration ceremony. In fact, Ireland entered the Union in 1973 together with Denmark and the United Kingdom during the first enlargement of the European Union.¹⁹⁹ Ireland entered the European Economic Community as a poor and peripheral country. However, after joining the country, with the support of the Union, it increased its economic indicators, modernized its economy, and became an example for new members.²⁰⁰ The "Ireland case" was, therefore, the objective to emulate for the new members.

On May 1, 2004, the ten new members officially joined the European Union.²⁰¹ This process resulted in the most significant enlargement in European history, both in terms of people and in terms of the number of countries. In conclusion, the Prodi Commission has completed the fifth enlargement project, which was begun with Delors and continued by Santer. At the end of 2004, the Union counted twenty-five member states. It is important to highlight that, during the fifth enlargement process, the inclusion of Russia was not seriously taken into consideration by the European countries. Despite Russia's significant importance for the development of geopolitical stability in the post-Cold War European continent, the European Union aimed primarily to establish a

¹⁹⁷ O'Brennan, J. (2006). The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. p. 93.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 93.

¹⁹⁹ European Union (2025). EU Enlargement.

²⁰⁰ O'Brennan, J. (2006). The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. p. 52.

²⁰¹ European Union (2025). EU Enlargement.

strategic political partnership with Moscow while encouraging the development of internal reforms within the country.²⁰² During the early 1990s, Brussels regarded Moscow mainly as a potential economic partner, envisioning the future creation of a free trade area in the early 2000s in exchange for the Kremlin's commitment to democratic principles and the protection of human rights.²⁰³

Furthermore, the Union did not advocate for Russia's participation in the fifth enlargement process, partly because Russia itself showed little interest in being included in the process. Moscow initially rejected the possibility of inclusion within the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) while pursuing a region-building strategy of its own, with a primary focus on safeguarding its economic interests.²⁰⁴ Since the collapse of the USSR, the European Union has sought to develop the ENP in parallel with a strategic partnership with Russia, failing to persuade the Kremlin, as it was very determined to maintain its influence over the countries formerly within the Soviet sphere.²⁰⁵ As a result of this competition over the post-Soviet space, Brussels and Moscow were ultimately unable to deepen their partnership during the 1990s and early 2000s.

²⁰² Cameron, F. (1999). *The Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union*. Sheffield Academic Press. p. 87.

²⁰³ Ibid. p.87.

²⁰⁴ Bharti, M.S. (2021). EU-Russian Relations and the Eastern Enlargement: integration or isolation. Bharti, M.S. (2021). EU-Russian Relations and the Eastern Enlargement: integration or isolation. *Journal of Scientific Papers "Social Development and Security"*, Vol. 11, No. 6, 2021. DOI: 10.33445/sds.2021.11.6.12. p. 159.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 161.

Chapter III: Russian perspective on the EU Expansion

3.1: Russia's initial response to the EU Enlargement in the post-Soviet space

The fifth enlargement of the European Union cannot be fully understood without considering Russia's perception of the Union and NATO expansion as direct threats to its strategic interests. Indeed, the enlargement was interpreted by the Kremlin as part of a broader reconfiguration of the European balance of power, significantly shaping the evolution of Russia's foreign policy. At the beginning of the 1990s, Russian foreign policy had as its primary objective the rapprochement with Washington and the European member states, integrating Moscow into the Western political, economic, and security system.²⁰⁶ This approach was driven by Russia's desire to establish stronger ties with the West. During the decade, such hopes gradually faded due to the expansion of NATO, in particular with the intervention of the Atlantic Alliance in Serbia in the spring of 1999.²⁰⁷

The Russian perspective on the EU enlargement was guided by its national strategic interests, such as the territorial integrity of Russian territory, the supremacy in the post-Soviet space, securing weapons of mass destruction and atomic weapons of the USSR, promoting Russian economic development, maintenance of the status of a great power, and the affirmation of the status of equality with the other G7 countries.²⁰⁸ The divergence with Western countries was mainly derived from supremacy in the post-Soviet space. With the enlargements of the EU and NATO in the early 2000s, there was conflict across the board with the Kremlin's objective. Furthermore, while Russia could secure equal status in the G8 in exchange for "liberal-democratic" reforms, it could no longer secure great power status, one of its first objectives in foreign policy since the 1990s.²⁰⁹

One of the first main events in the collaboration between Russia and its Western partners can be traced back to the speech of Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev in the summer of 1992, in which he expressed Russia's desire to aspire to be a democratic country: "Russians exerted all their strength to defeat the communist party and rejoin

²⁰⁶ Lynch, A.C. (2002). The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*. pp. 161–182.

²⁰⁷ Ingimundarson, V. (2022). The "Kosovo Precedent": Russia's justification of military interventions and territorial revisions in Georgia and Ukraine. LSE Ideas. <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/2022-SU-Valur-RussKosovo.pdf>.

²⁰⁸ Lynch, A.C. (2002). The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s. pp. 161–182.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. pp. 161–182.

other nations on the path to civilization. The conflict with the Western countries derives mainly from the logical conclusion of this struggle, which is Russia's unification with the West."²¹⁰ On the basis of this declaration, the Russian government desired to promote economic and political cooperation with advanced democracies, opening the possibility of integration into Western organizations.²¹¹ In fact, without the adoption of human rights standards, Russia would have risked finding itself isolated at the international level.

Moreover, the Kremlin saw in the early 1990s the collaboration with the Euro-Atlantic bloc as an opportunity to strengthen itself and develop beneficial relations on an economic and commercial level. Another area of rapprochement was in the field of collaboration on the dismantling of nuclear weapons in the former Soviet republics, as in the case of Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan.²¹² In this regard, an example of this intention lies in the signing of the Budapest Memorandum in December 1994, with which Ukraine joined the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and formalized the delivery of nuclear weapons present on its territory after the dissolution of the USSR to the Russian Federation.²¹³

In this historical phase, Minister Kozyrev, who served as Russian foreign minister from 1990 to 1996, led Russian foreign policy during the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation. The Russian foreign minister emphasized President Yeltsin's liberal-democratic vision and took a pro-Western stance, seeing the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance as crucial partners for his country.²¹⁴

However, after NATO began expanding into the former Soviet space in January 1996, nationalist Yevgen Primakov, an ardent opponent of NATO's expansion, replaced Kozyrev, becoming the second foreign minister of the Russian Federation. With this handover, Russian foreign policy has shifted from being Western-oriented to Eurasian-oriented, moving the center of gravity of strategic interest eastwards.²¹⁵ Primakov was promoted to Prime Minister in 1999, and he developed the Primakov doctrine, promoting

²¹⁰ Markov, S. (1995). NATO: The Two Faces of Moscow. Moscow Times, as reprinted in The World Press Review, Vol.42, No.10 (Oct. 1995), p.17.

²¹¹ Lynch, A.C. (2002). The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s. pp. 161–182.

²¹² Ibid. pp. 161–182.

²¹³ Harvard Kennedy School (1994). Ukraine: The Budapest Memorandum of 1994. https://policymemos.hks.harvard.edu/files/policymemos/files/2-23-22_ukraine-the_budapest_memo.pdf?m=1645824948.

²¹⁴ Lynch, A.C. (2002). The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s. pp. 161–182.

²¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 161–182.

a triangular collaboration between Russia, China, and India to counterbalance the United States, in stark opposition to the vision of his predecessor, Kozyrev.²¹⁶

Focusing on the expansion of the European Union into the post-Soviet space in the 1990s, Russian foreign policy, in this phase, proved to be in favor of an EU enlargement, seeing Brussels as a fundamental economic and political partner.²¹⁷ To all intents and purposes, at this stage, Russia was still too weak to exert influence on the countries belonging to the former Soviet bloc in favor of a neutral foreign policy. At the same time, the perspective of stronger economic ties with the European Union became very central in the Kremlin's foreign policy.²¹⁸

Indeed, during the 1990s, the European Union enlargement was not considered a threat to Russia's foreign policy. In doing so, Russia has become increasingly dependent on the European market and vice versa. At the same time, Russian politicians and diplomats have not set themselves the goal of joining the European Union, maintaining collaboration with Brussels only in economic terms.²¹⁹ At the same time, many states in the Soviet space of influence, such as Poland and the Baltic countries, exploited the Russian stalemate to impress themselves in the Euro-Western mechanisms, parallel with the Russian neutrality during Gorbachev and then Yeltsin's presidencies.²²⁰ A key declaration in this regard was provided by Foreign Minister Primakov in 1997, who stated that "Russia's attitude to the Baltic countries' possible membership in the European Union is positive."²²¹

While the Union's enlargement was not perceived as an immediate threat by Moscow, the expansion of the Atlantic Alliance provoked deep concern among Russian politicians and diplomats.²²² Russia agreed to NATO's eastward expansion with the signing of the Russian Charter of May 1997.²²³ In exchange, the Atlantic Alliance promised the Kremlin the creation of permanent cooperation with the Russia-NATO

²¹⁶ Rumer, E. (2019). The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep20980.6>.

²¹⁷ Lynch, A.C. (2002). The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s. pp. 161–182.

²¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 161–182.

²¹⁹ Lynch, D. (2004). Russia's Strategic Partnership with Europe. European Union Institute for Security Studies. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/analy077.pdf>.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ ITAR-TASS (1997). Primakov Accepts Baltic Accession to European Union. The Jamestown Foundation. <https://jamestown.org/program/primakov-accepts-baltic-accession-to-european-union/>.

²²² Lynch, A.C. (2002). The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s. pp. 161–182.

²²³ U.S. Department of State (1997). NATO-Russia Founding Act. https://1997-2001.state.gov/regions/eur/fs_nato_whitehouse.html.

Council, giving Moscow a voice in NATO deliberations.²²⁴ Initially, cooperation between Russia and the Atlantic Alliance seemed promising, for example, when Moscow sent troops under the NATO command to the peacekeeping mission in Bosnia.²²⁵ However, harmony between the parties was challenged as the war spread to Serbia in the spring of 1999.²²⁶ With Operation Allied Force and the subsequent bombing of Belgrade, Russia left the joint Russia-NATO Council under the impulse of Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, who defined the Atlantic Alliance's attack on the country led by Milosevic as "genocide."²²⁷

NATO's intervention in Serbia can, therefore, be defined as an important trauma for Russian foreign policy, as the Atlantic Alliance violated the mandate of the UN Security Council by employing the use of force without permission. In the Russian Foreign Ministry, the event had serious repercussions, starting to make Russian institutions perceive a strong skepticism towards Western countries, as they had acted without consulting Moscow, which was against the intervention. The Kremlin felt deprived of the much-desired equal status, thus failing to achieve its foreign policy objectives.²²⁸ In any case, in the short term, the consequences of the NATO intervention in Serbia did not impact the collaboration between Moscow and Brussels.²²⁹

In conclusion, in the 1990s, Russian foreign policy was very accommodating to the European Union, emphasizing trade and the development of the economic sector as a common fertile ground for collaboration with Brussels. However, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the collaboration between Moscow and Brussels had, therefore, evolved as a direct consequence of the intervention in Serbia, in parallel with the War in Chechnya, which ended with Putin's election on December 31, 1999.²³⁰ During the early 2000s, Russian foreign policy under President Putin moved from a phase of collaboration to one of confrontation, especially in terms of cooperation with Western countries, in discontinuity with Gorbachev and Yeltsin.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Davydov, Y. P. (1998). *Rossiya i NATO*, "Posle Bala." SShA, No.1, pp.3–18.

²²⁶ Ingimundarson, V. (2022). The "Kosovo Precedent": Russia's justification of military interventions and territorial revisions in Georgia and Ukraine.

²²⁷ *Diplomaticheskii vestnik* (1999). Nos. 4 (April), 5 (May) and 6 (June), *passim*.

²²⁸ Lynch, A.C. (2002). *The Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s*. pp. 161–182.

²²⁹ AP News (2024). Putin's timeline of Russia's presidency and inauguration. <https://apnews.com/article/putin-russia-president-inauguration-timeline-413e4d80b14c7b4113f1abe576e4a5c2>.

²³⁰ Ibid.

3.2: The Russian position on EU Expansion during Putin's first mandate

As a result of the elections held in March 2000, Vladimir Putin became the second president in the history of the Russian Federation. During that historical period, the path of distancing from democratic principles started to emerge, mainly in connection with respect for human rights, an essential condition for becoming part of European mechanisms.²³¹ Putin's Russia challenged liberal democracy and Western countries, and precisely, the concept of wanting to democratize Russia from European states was one of the reasons why the relationship with the West deteriorated, increasing the Kremlin's hostility. Furthermore, Putin perceived the growing influence of Western countries in the post-Soviet space as a significant factor deteriorating the relations between Moscow and Brussels, as the Kremlin viewed this challenge as a direct threat.²³²

The theme of the Union enlargement to Eastern Europe can be traced back to Moscow's agenda in relation to the issue of the visa regime for the Kaliningrad oblast, as with the entry of Lithuania and Poland into the Schengen area, the territory would have been surrounded by the borders of the European Union.²³³ Already in the 1990s, from Moscow's perspective, the eastern enlargement was also a platform to get closer to the Western market and, at the same time, ensure the maintenance of peace in Europe, promoting the interests of member states in the energy and trade sectors. In parallel, Russia was reluctant to conform to the *acquis* and European standards. However, it saw the possibility of a more significant cooperation with the Union as an important opportunity to develop its domestic market and economy.

In fact, in the early 2000s, Russia was still in complicated financial conditions and, therefore, had the perspective of having more collaboration with European capitals as an asset.²³⁴ In Brussels's view, the fifth enlargement was an economic and political development by which former satellite states of the USSR were linked to European mechanisms for economic and commercial purposes. Additionally, Moscow did not see the fifth enlargement as a geopolitical threat but rather as a matter connected to more

²³¹ Maass, A.-S. (2017). *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation*. London: Routledge. p. 195.

²³² Ibid. p. 195.

²³³ Antonenko, O. & Pinnick, K. (2005). *Russia and the European Union: Prospects for a New Relationship*. London: Routledge. p. 35.

²³⁴ Ibid. p. 9.

significant customs formalities and increased controls for citizens entering the Schengen area, as well as the expansion of a Western economic alliance.²³⁵

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, despite the parties' willingness to create closer economic ties, significant challenges hampered the political dialogue between the European Union and the Russian Federation due to their different goals. A substantial divergence that prevented the parties from getting closer in terms of political cooperation concerned the institutional structure of the parties. On the one hand, Russia, as a sovereign and independent state, possesses institutions dedicated exclusively to advancing its national interests. On the other hand, the European Union, as a supranational organization with limited sovereignty, faces a fragmentation of priorities among its member states. The European states, in the wake of the relations developed with Russia during the nineties, were, therefore, still defining a common foreign policy towards the Kremlin.²³⁶

Moreover, another critical point against Russia in its process of approaching the European Union concerned the bilateral relations with the countries that were part of the former Soviet bloc, mainly due to the tensions with Poland and the Baltic countries.²³⁷ For Moscow, relations with Warsaw, Vilnius, Riga, and Tallinn were historically stormy due to the annexation of the forces of these states within the USSR sphere of influence.²³⁸ These states have not questioned the possibility of joining the Union in favor of the Russian Federation, reaffirming their will to be part of the European community. For this reason, relations between Moscow and Brussels were characterized by a mixture of cooperation and tensions, as the Russian desire to influence the states belonging to the post-Soviet space complicated a further process of rapprochement between the parties.

To all intents and purposes, the Eastern European borders were also a terrain of tensions between the two parties. The relations between Russia and the European Union have undergone the first test regarding the Moldova-Transnistria situation.²³⁹ Since 1992, in fact, a civil war has been fought in Moldovan territory between the separatist forces of

²³⁵ Ibid. p. 23.

²³⁶ Ibid. p. 211.

²³⁷ Mezhevich, N. (2015). Russia and the Baltic States: Some Results and a Few Perspectives. *Baltic Region* 2(2):4-12. DOI: 10.5922/2079-8555-2015-2-1.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Kliment, A. (2005). The Transnistrian Dilemma. *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 1, pp. 71-73. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26999248>.

Tiraspol, supported by Moscow, against the central government of Chisinau, supported by Romania.²⁴⁰ In May 2003, at the dawn of the fifth enlargement, the idea of the European Council was to replace the peacekeeping mission led by Russia with a peacekeeping mission at an intra-European level.²⁴¹ Russia firmly opposed this hypothesis, indicating that such an initiative would complicate the ongoing peace negotiations.²⁴² The Union accepted the Russian request and made itself available to intervene in the future.

However, the situation heated up on November 16, 2003, when the Deputy Head of the Russian Presidential Administration, Dmitry Kozak, proposed the “Kozak memorandum,” in which he proposed the creation of a Federal Republic of Moldova while leaving Transnistria with a significant degree of autonomy.²⁴³ Moldovan President Voronin strongly opposed this possibility, leading to the failure of this Russian plan and calling for a multilateral resolution of the situation with the involvement of European forces.²⁴⁴ This event represented the second challenge of cooperation between the European Union and Russia after the NATO intervention in Serbia in the spring of 1999.²⁴⁵ In any case, the European states sent a clear signal to Moscow, namely that the Union would not give the Kremlin a free hand in the post-Soviet space despite the economic and political cooperation.

A further point of divergence between Brussels and Moscow concerned their perceptions of the European Security and Defense Policy. According to Brussels' view, the ESDP was a foreign policy instrument, allowing the participation of non-EU states without decision-making power and only under limited conditions.²⁴⁶ For Moscow, however, this instrument was seen as the basis for building a core of defense cooperation with equal status. The Kremlin's primary concern was the expansion of the European

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Wróbel, J. (2003). The European Union and Moldova. Central European University. http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00002229/01/eu_and_md.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0ozlFqB4JTK66xTaPbBO3dGDR_ymn0rZ9DR5.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Solovyov, V. (2023). A Resolution to the Transnistria Conflict Is More Distant Than Ever. Carnegie Politika. <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/politika/2023/12/a-resolution-to-the-transnistria-conflict-is-more-distant-than-ever?lang=en>.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ingimundarson, V. (2022). The “Kosovo Precedent”: Russia's justification of military interventions and territorial revisions in Georgia and Ukraine.

²⁴⁶ Antonenko, O. & Pinnick, K. (2005). Russia and the European Union: Prospects for a New Relationship. p. 28.

Union's geopolitical area of interest, with the ESDP becoming an offensive foreign policy instrument to extend its area of influence. At the same time, with the expansion of Brussels' radius of interest, Russia would have gone from a partner to a possible enemy, a status not favorable to Moscow.²⁴⁷

Moreover, another area of conflict concerned the export of democratic ideology to Eastern Europe. The process of economic, political, and legal harmonization due to the acceptance of the *acquis communautaire* of the new members would have meant that the countries of Eastern Europe would not only have been independent but, above all, democratic. Putin perceived the attractiveness of Western values as an imminent danger: Russia would no longer be able to exert influence in Eastern Europe and would, therefore, lose its control over the former satellite states. Additionally, the closer the European Union got to Russia's western borders, the more these values could influence Russian public opinion and provoke a possible democratic revolution in Russia, too.²⁴⁸ President Putin viewed the "Europeanization" of Russia as a threat.²⁴⁹

However, ahead of the Russia-EU summit in November 2003, in an interview with the Italian press, he affirmed, "For us, Europe is a major trade and economic partner and our natural, most important partner, including in the political sphere. Russia is not located on the American continent, after all, but in Europe. [...] Russia is interested in developing relations with our partners in the U.S. and the American continent as a whole and in Asia, but, of course, above all with Europe."²⁵⁰ The Russian President thus conceived Russia and the European Union as distinct and separate entities, bound primarily by shared economic interests. President Putin considered the bilateral relations with France, Germany, and the United Kingdom far more significant than his relations with Brussels.²⁵¹ Moreover, while the Kremlin saw NATO enlargement as a significant strategic event, the enlargement of the EU on May 1, 2004, was met with relative indifference in Russia.²⁵²

²⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 28.

²⁴⁸ Bort, C. (2024). How the Traumas of 2004 Blinded Putin. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/how-the-traumas-of-2004-blinded-putin?lang=en>.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Lynch, D. (2004). Russia's strategic partnership with Europe.

²⁵¹ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2004). Russia and the European Union. United States, Washington D.C. <https://carnegieendowment.org/events/2004/05/russia-and-the-european-union?lang=en>.

²⁵² Ibid.

A final challenge concerns the perception among Russian institutions that many actions by the Union were aimed at disadvantaging Russia. For instance, it was evident in the case of the automatic extension of the PCA to new Union member states.²⁵³ Moscow has often sought to gain negotiating advantages, attempting to divide European countries into two categories: the group of countries that want to compromise with the Kremlin and the group of those hostile to the Russians.²⁵⁴ This perception further complicated the development of closer relations between the two sides, as the Kremlin did not perceive the possibility of perceiving equal or more significant advantages than the Union after the fifth enlargement.

For all these reasons, Putin started to export energy resources as a weapon to counterbalance the influence of the Union in the post-Soviet area.²⁵⁵ In fact, the threat of blocking Russian gas and methane supplies in case of any direct conflict was an effective weapon to appease European countries in their relationship with Russia; mindful of the 1973 energy crisis following the Yom Kippur War, European politicians are aware of the consequences that an energy crisis can bring to the European continent.²⁵⁶ This strategy, which began at this stage, has led to an increasing energy dependence on the part of many member states of the European Union, complicating the possibility of finding alternative solutions and remaining dependent on resources exported from Russia.

To sum up, the year of the fifth enlargement, 2004, was a turning point in Russian foreign policy, which decisively changed Moscow's vision of the EU. Firstly, Russia felt threatened by the new European states that had been part of the post-Soviet space for decades, particularly Poland and Lithuania. With the entry of these members, the foreign policy of the European states had to consider the requests of the new members, shifting the center of gravity of European strategic interest to the East. The Kremlin saw Brussels' growing influence in the region not just as the end of a path that began in the 1990s but as the beginning of a process in which, over the following decades, it would dominate the entire post-Soviet space.²⁵⁷ In fact, Moscow was unable to offer these countries the same

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Maass, A.-S. (2017). *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation*. p. 85.

²⁵⁵ Keukeleire, S. & Delreux, T. (2022). *The Foreign Policy of the European Union. The Foreign Policy of the European Union*. Bloomsbury Academic - The European Union Series.

²⁵⁶ Givens, R.P. (2002). 1973 Yom Kippur War. Turning the Vertical Flank: Airpower as a Maneuver Force in the Theater Campaign. Air University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13973.9>.

²⁵⁷ Maass, A.-S. (2017). *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation*. p. 85.

guarantees of wealth and prosperity that the Union could assure them, giving rise to new tensions in relations between the two parties. Ultimately, due to the Union's expansion, the overlapping spheres of influence of the two geopolitical actors have created hotspots of friction.²⁵⁸ However, despite these conflicting interests, the early 2000s saw development in economic and political cooperation between the European Union and the Russian Federation, expanding their collaboration to include the security of the European continent.

3.3: From collaboration to confrontation: Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia

After a long phase of collaboration, tensions have begun to arise between the European Union and the Russian Federation in relation to the control of the post-Soviet space. These divergences led Russia to invade Georgia in 2008, creating a precedent that has impacted the subsequent cooperation between Brussels and Moscow.²⁵⁹ Following the fifth enlargement, tensions between the European Union and Russia increased already in November 2004, following a series of political protests in Ukraine called the "Orange Revolution."²⁶⁰ This crisis was the first major political crisis between Brussels and Moscow. European and Russian politicians knew that the outcome of this divergence would mark Kyiv's European perspective. The protests of Ukrainian citizens demanded that the new government adopt anti-oligarch and anti-corruption measures in opposition to the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovych, supported by Putin. Simultaneously, the protesters supported the pro-European candidate Viktor Yushchenko, endorsed by Brussels, who hoped to advance Ukraine in the process of the Union enlargement.²⁶¹

For instance, Yanukovych supported his opposition to Ukraine's integration with the EU, underlining the historical ties with the Kremlin: "[Ukraine] has always been an "alternative Europe" with our own faith, history, and homeland. [...] One cannot achieve acknowledgment in the [European circle] unless one has historical memory and human

²⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 85.

²⁵⁹ Svante, E. C. & al. (2008). Russia's War in Georgia: Causes and Implications for Georgia and the War. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program. https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2008_08_PP_CornellPopjanevskiNillson_Russia-Georgia.pdf.

²⁶⁰ Kuzio, T. (2005). Ukraine's 2004 Presidential Election: The Orange Revolution. Columbia University. https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/et/et_v12n4/et_v12n4_003.pdf.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

persistence in upholding one's own national interests. [...] This is why there is no choice for us between the [EU] and Russia. We are tied to Russia by culture and by blood.”²⁶²

On the contrary, the pro-European candidate Yushchenko criticized Ukraine's failure to enter the fifth enlargement project, arguing that Ukrainian citizens “were anxious about European integration halting at our western frontier and in fact creating a new dividing line,” adding that “we in the East are subject of a European policy, the very jargon of which jars our ears precisely because we always considered ourselves part of Europe, and not just neighbors.”²⁶³ Furthermore, he indicated that the electoral tensions in Ukraine would also be reflected in the relations between Brussels and Moscow, stating that the election would be the “climax in the struggle between a European and a non-European choice for Ukraine.”²⁶⁴

In December 2004, following protests, Ukraine's Supreme Court annulled the run-off due to electoral fraud.²⁶⁵ On December 26, 2004, new elections were held, which awarded Yushchenko with 52% of the preferences.²⁶⁶ The outcome of these elections drastically changed the Kremlin's perception of the European Union. Although skirmishes between Moscow and Brussels had already begun in 1999 over the war in Kosovo, Russian politicians and policymakers began to see the Union as an enemy both for the stability of the post-Soviet space and as a threat to the semi-authoritarian Russian system.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, supported by President Putin, denounced the Union for having encouraged the protests in Ukraine, criticizing the “attempts by certain governments to steer the situation in Ukraine away from a legal path.”²⁶⁷ In particular, he declared that “certain European capitals are declaring that they did not recognize the election and that Ukraine has to be with the West. These declarations make one think that someone would very much like to draw up new border lines across

²⁶² BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (2004). Ukrainian premier committed to ties with Russia, welfare state. Source: Sislki Visti, Kiev.

²⁶³ Yushchenko, V. (2004). Whither Ukraine. Plotting Europe's eastern border. International Herald Tribune.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Kuzio, T. (2005). Ukraine's 2004 Presidential Election: The Orange Revolution.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Strauss, J. (2004). Moscow accuses EU of meddling in Ukraine. Daily Telegraph.

Europe.”²⁶⁸ Then, he remarked that the attempt by European states to “isolate Russia [might] have fatal consequences for a united Europe.”²⁶⁹

In support of Ukraine, there were instead the statements of the EU Commissioner for External Relations, Chris Patten, who emphasized that they criticized Russia for seeking “weak neighbors and a sphere of influence inhabited by dependent supplicants.”²⁷⁰ Additionally, he added that he would “take vigilance to ensure that Ukraine [was] not now bullied off the democratic path it [had] chosen by political threats.”²⁷¹ The positions of Moscow and Brussels were, therefore, opposed to the Ukrainian question, marking the beginning of a path of tensions and confrontation between the two parties. While the Union was in favor of democratic developments in the states belonging to the post-Soviet space, Russia was vehemently opposed to such developments, denouncing European interference in its sphere of influence.

A few months after the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, another crisis fueled the political crisis between Moscow and Brussels. In early 2005, in Kyrgyzstan, for reasons similar to the events in Ukraine, citizens protested against the alleged fraudulent elections and the nepotism of President Askar Akayev.²⁷² The European Union’s position against the Kyrgyz regime was condemnatory, and in response, Russia accused the Union of interfering with the internal affairs of another country.²⁷³ Solana denounced the conditions of the elections.²⁷⁴ In particular, he declared that they “did [neither] conform to the OSCE’s requirements [nor] to other international standards.”²⁷⁵

Lavrov’s response to Solana was very harsh, stating that it contains “incorrect assessments of the situation in [the country] and their underlying causes and [for being] counterproductive.”²⁷⁶ In an article in *Russia in Global Affairs*, the Russian Foreign Minister declared that the European Union was using the excuse of promoting democracy

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Averre, D. (2005). Russia and the European Union: Convergence or divergence? *European Security*. 14(2): 175–202.

²⁷⁰ Patten, C. (2006). *Cousins and Strangers. America, Britain and Europe in a new century*. New York: Times Books.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Temirkulov, A. (2018). Kyrgyz “revolutions” in 2005 and 2010: comparative analysis of mass mobilization. *Nationalities Papers*. 38(5):589-600. doi:10.1080/00905992.2010.503617.

²⁷³ Maass, A.-S. (2017). *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation*. p. 96.

²⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 96.

²⁷⁵ BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit (2005). EU says non-violence principle vital in search for solution in Kyrgyzstan. Source: ITAR-TASS.

²⁷⁶ BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union (2005). Russian Foreign Minister criticises EU foreign policy chief over Kyrgyzstan. Source: ITAR-TASS.

to advance its geostrategic interests.²⁷⁷ He also criticized the Union for having caused “no less damage to the universality of democratic principles [...] by attempts, under the banner of “defending democracy,” to interfere cruelly in the internal affairs of other countries and exert political pressure on them. The [se attempts] merely discredit democratic values, turning them into small change for the attainment of selfish geostrategic interests.”²⁷⁸

Lavrov’s statement was aligned with the position of the Kremlin, which stuck back to Brussels’ desire to export democracy in the post-Soviet space. Moscow’s objective to emphasize the principles of sovereignty and autonomy was in stark contrast with the spread of European democratic values, as it could exponentially increase the influence of the European Union in the region. The distance between the two parties in foreign policy was increasingly evident. Vladimir Putin’s Russia and José Barroso’s Europe, President of the European Commission since November 2004, went gradually from cooperating to being enemies.²⁷⁹

The extent of the crisis in relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation was also highlighted by the then-Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov, who threatened both the United States and the Union that they had not “abandoned stereotypes of the past, which [was] come from the reaction of certain circles in Europe and the USA to the political crisis in Ukraine.”²⁸⁰ His opinion was supported by that of Modest Kolerov, a close collaborator of Dmitry Medvedev, who, on March 18, 2005, published an article called “The Front against Russia: Sanitary Cordon and External Management.”²⁸¹ In this analysis, Kolerov stated that “[was] not the perimeters of Russia’s borders or the squeezing of Russia out of its border areas that [was] currently at issue; [but] Russia’s split along the Volga axis, which in practice [implied] the demand to introduce external management’ by Brussels in Russia’s European zone.”²⁸²

Following this publication, Gleb Pavlovsky, the Kremlin’s political adviser and collaborator of Putin, one of the most important and influential anti-EU theorists in

²⁷⁷ Maass, A.-S. (2017). *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation*. p. 96.

²⁷⁸ Lavrov, S. (2005). *Democracy, International Governance and the Future World Order*. Russia in Global Affairs No. 1 Jan–March 2005. http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_4422.

²⁷⁹ Cini, M. (2005). *Pragmatism Prevails: Barroso’s European Commission*. Chatham House. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Europe/bpbarroso.pdf>.

²⁸⁰ Herd, G.H. (2005). Russia and the “Orange Revolution”: Response, rhetoric and reality. *The Quarterly Journal*. 4(2): 15–28.

²⁸¹ Maass, A.-S. (2017). *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation*. p. 98.

²⁸² Kolerov, M. (2005). *Front protiv Rossii: “sanitaryi kordon” i “vneshnee upravlenie.”* Regnum. www.regnum.ru/news/423582.html#ixzzlEAXQ6Xs4.

Moscow, agreed with Kolerov's vision.²⁸³ He denounced that following the fifth enlargement, the new members of the European Union were influencing the foreign policy of Brussels, pushing for the "Balticisation of the EU."²⁸⁴ At this point, the conflict between Russia and the Baltic States was increasingly heated, and consequently, the tensions with the Union began to increase.

Consequently, European Commissioner Guenther Verheugen condemned Moscow for exerting influence against the Baltic states, stressing that in relation to Russia, "our relations are based on truth. [...] We should not hide the fact that the three Baltic [countries] were occupied against their will for a long time."²⁸⁵ Immediately, Putin's right-hand man, Sergey Yastrzhembsky, rejected such statements, condemning them as "inappropriate and inopportune."²⁸⁶ Moreover, he added that the "deployment of Russian troops took place with the clearly expressed agreement of the existing authorities in the Baltic states" and accused the Baltic countries of "historical phobia and prejudices."²⁸⁷

In continuity with the previous two years, in 2006, relations between the European Union and the Russian Federation continued to deteriorate. Specifically, the clash between the two sides occurred over energy policy, with the Russian government ordering Gazprom to stop delivering gas to Ukraine in January 2006.²⁸⁸ Several member states, including Slovakia, Hungary, and the Baltic countries, which were heavily reliant on Russian energy sources, found themselves particularly vulnerable to pressure from Moscow.²⁸⁹ As a result, nine of the twenty-five European states were hit by shortages.²⁹⁰

Brussels' response to this situation was the preparation of a Green Paper on the European strategy for the energy sector, which stressed the need for states to achieve a "diversity of energy type, country of origin and transit."²⁹¹ In addition, the European Commission noted in the paper "An External Policy to Serve Europe's Energy Interests" that an "increasing dependence on imports from unstable regions and suppliers presents

²⁸³ Maass, A.-S. (2017). *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation*. p. 98.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p. 98.

²⁸⁵ EurActiv (2005). Verheugen remarks cast shadow over EU-Russia summit. www.euractiv.com/en/security/verheugen-remarks-cast-shadows-eu-russia-summit/article-139151.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁸ Maass, A.-S. (2017). *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation*. p. 192.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p. 192.

²⁹⁰ Agence France Presse (2006). Gaz russe: l'UE subit déjà les effets de l'arrêt des livraisons à l'Ukraine.

²⁹¹ European Council (2006). An external policy to serve Europe's energy interests. Paper from Commission/SG/HR for the European Council (S160/06). www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/reports/90082.pdf.

a serious risk.”²⁹² The European Parliament also voted in a resolution supporting the Commission's proposal to create a common external energy policy.²⁹³

In the same year, the Kremlin tightened its authoritarian grip on the country on October 7, 2006, with the assassination of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya of *Novaya Gazeta* because of her publications denouncing serious human rights violations in Chechnya.²⁹⁴ However, at the Lahti summit on October 20, 2006, the European Union demonstrated its fragmentation in confronting the Kremlin. In fact, although the President of the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the heads of states of Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, and Poland criticized Putin, the Finnish European Council Presidency underestimated the concerns of the former, being much softer with the Russian President.²⁹⁵ The Finnish Prime Minister, indeed, had in his agenda the intention of developing a more coherent strategy on energy policy, adding that Vladimir Putin's presence at the summit would “result in a more united EU, creating a positive spirit of cooperation where many expressed a will to put an end to the internal controversy about energy policy.”²⁹⁶

The Lahti summit also involved the issue of the renewal of the PCA, which would have been automatically renewed in December 2007 unless one of the two parties disagreed.²⁹⁷ Some European politicians, following this, tried to condition the renewal of the PCA as a consequence of the improvement of human rights in Russia and the liberalization of its energy policy, which Gazprom monopolized.²⁹⁸ In particular, Graham Watson, leader of the European Parliament's Alliance of Liberals and Democrats in Europe, called for the PCA with Russia not to be renewed as long as “freedom, transparency and the rule of law [were] established and the legal certainty for investors, which follow[ed] from them.”²⁹⁹ However, due to divergences within the member states

²⁹² Maass, A.-S. (2017). EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation. Email interview with an expert in the Directorate General Energy in the European Commission. Interview conducted on 4 May 2011.

²⁹³ Maass, A.-S. (2017). EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation. p. 116.

²⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 118.

²⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 118.

²⁹⁶ Finnish European Council Presidency (2006). The presidency meets the press. In Helsinki: Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen. In Brussels: journalists from different countries. www.eu2006.fi/MEDIA-SERVICES/EN--GB/presidency--meets-press/index.htm.

²⁹⁷ Maass, A.-S. (2017). EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation. p. 124.

²⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 121.

²⁹⁹ European Report (2006). Lahti European Union summit: presidency and MEPs divided on summit results. TV Broadcast.

and the community institutions, the Union was unable to maintain a unified vision on the issue since the decision on the automatic renewal of the PCA had to be approved unanimously.

On the divergence, Putin attributed the problems relating to the PCA to the internal divisions of the Union, adding that “Russia was prepared to launch these talks. Delay [would] not affect in a negative way the entire set of relations between the EU and Russia. We extend the document on an annual basis, so there will be no legal gap in our relations. We will be patient, wait for an agreed position by the EU, and finally, we will hope we can all contribute to achieving this.”³⁰⁰ Instead, in reference to journalists’ questions about the death of their colleague Anna Politkovskaya, the Russian President declared that “we should not forget that such crimes do not only happen in Russia. In other European countries, there are well-known political murders that have not yet been resolved. This is our common problem.”³⁰¹ He continued, “Let us look at what is happening with the mafia in several EU countries, which, not in an isolated incident but systematically, destroys representatives of law-enforcement agencies, judges, prosecutors, investigators, journalists, and political figures. It takes decades to catch these mafiosi in European countries.”³⁰²

In January 2007, contrary to what happened with the Finnish Presidency, with the beginning of the German European Council Presidency, Chancellor Angela Merkel stated in her first speech that Berlin could not ignore the “freedom of the press [and] civil liberties” in the relations between Moscow and Brussels.³⁰³ Additionally, she proposed including an article in the PCA stating that Russia would have to give advance notice to the Union in case of potential interruptions in energy supply.³⁰⁴ Following this request, Putin stated that “bloc mentalities [should not] prevail in European politics, nor should [...] new dividing lines appear on our continent or unilateral projects to be implemented

³⁰⁰ Finnish European Council Presidency (2006). EU-Russia summit press conference. www.eu2006.fi/MEDIA_SERVICES/WEBCASTS/EN_GB/ARCHIVE_NOVEMBER/INDEX.HTM.

³⁰¹ The Kremlin (2006). Joint Press Conference with the Prime Minister of Finland Matti Vanhanen, President of the European Commission Jose Manuel Barroso, Secretary-General of the EU Council and the EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, Prime Minister of Norway Jens Stoltenberg and Prime Minister of Iceland Geir Haarde following the Russia-EU meeting. President of Russia. Official Web Portal. www.archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2006/11/24/2355_type92914type82915_114506.shtml.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Radio Free Europe (2007). German chancellor calls for reliable relations with Russia. www.rferl.org/content/article/1143793.html.

³⁰⁴ Maass, A.-S. (2017). EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation. p. 123.

to the detriment of the interests and security of our neighbors.”³⁰⁵ The Russian President also added, regarding the negotiations for the renewal of the PCA, that “any pause in the dialogue is always going to be counterproductive.”³⁰⁶

Subsequently, in May 2007, the Samara summit was dominated by squabbles between the new member states and Russia.³⁰⁷ In particular, the disputes between Moscow, Warsaw, Tallinn, and Vilnius blocked the agenda and did not allow the renewal of the PCA on that occasion either.³⁰⁸ Shortly before that event, President Barroso remarked that the Union is “based on the principle of solidarity” and that a “Polish problem is a European problem; a Lithuanian problem is a European problem as well.”³⁰⁹ The principle of European solidarity caused frustration in the Kremlin, with Putin jokingly stating that “it is good that now Chancellor Merkel is speaking on behalf of Poland.”³¹⁰ Even at the EU-Russia summit in Mafra, Portugal, in October 2006, tensions between Brussels and Moscow remained, with the Union being more concerned about the increase in human rights violations in Russia.³¹¹

Since 2008, the relationship between the Union and Russia has reached a state of confrontation due to the Russian invasion of Georgia.³¹² Although the election of Dmitry Medvedev as President, with Putin as Prime Minister, in the spring of 2008 was perceived by the West as a “fresh start,” the European vision proved to be wrong.³¹³ Russia accused Europe of provoking it to intervene for two main reasons: the acceptance of Kosovo’s declaration of independence in February 2008 and the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, which opened the door for Ukraine and Georgia to become NATO members in the future.³¹⁴

With the outbreak of the Russian-Georgian War on August 7, 2008, negotiations regarding the inclusion of “democratic” clauses in the PCA came to a halt, with the

³⁰⁵ Putin, V. (2007). Russia is Europe’s natural ally. *The Sunday Times*. www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article1563806.ece.

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ Maass, A.-S. (2017). *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation*. p.126.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ EUX.TV (2007). Fruitless EU–Russia summit in Samara. TV Broadcast. www.youtube.com/watch?v=F7g9hYqTC_A.

³¹⁰ Agence France Presse (2007). *Eiszeit an der Wolga*. German.

³¹¹ Maass, A.-S. (2017). *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation*. p. 127.

³¹² Ibid. p. 127.

³¹³ Deloy, C. (2008). Unsurprising victory for Dmitri Medvedev in the Russian Presidential Election. Fondation Robert Schuman. <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/monitor/770-unsurprising-victory-for-dmitri-medvedev-in-the-russian-presidential-election>.

³¹⁴ Maass, A.-S. (2017). *EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation*. p. 138.

European Council deciding to block any development in this direction.³¹⁵ The Kremlin claimed it had to intervene to protect its citizens, an excuse not considered credible by the Western world.³¹⁶ Following the invasion, Moscow found itself occupying South Ossetia and Abkhazia, supporting local separatists with a *modus operandi* similar to that used with the military intervention in Chechnya.³¹⁷

Tbilisi asked Moscow to withdraw its troops within four weeks of the ultimatum, supported by France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States.³¹⁸ The European Union, under the impetus of the French Presidency of the European Council, immediately began to mediate between the parties, negotiating for a ceasefire.³¹⁹ After several negotiations, French President Sarkozy proposed a ceasefire agreement, accepted by the parties on August 12, 2008, containing six points: refrain from the use of force, stop the hostilities, free access to humanitarian aid, withdrawal of Georgian forces, return of Russian military to pre-crisis positions and the continuation of mediation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia under the control of the international community.³²⁰ Despite the peace agreement, Russia recognized the two breakaway republics as two independent states on August 26 and only partially implemented the points agreed upon in the peace agreement.³²¹ As a consequence, Georgia severed diplomatic relations with Russia. At this point, the EU's stance regarding future relations between Brussels and Moscow began to change.

On the argument, Sarkozy said in an interview that the central theme of confrontation between the two parties concerned the shared neighborhood, but that Europe was still trying to maintain a dialogue with the Kremlin because "Russia's near abroad is [...] as well as that of the EU. It is, in fact, our "common neighborhood." It should be a field of cooperation, not a terrain of rivalries."³²² After a decade and a half of collaboration between the two parties, the fractures between the Union and Russia were

³¹⁵ Ibid. p. 138.

³¹⁶ Ibid. p. 138.

³¹⁷ Svante, E. C. & al. (2008). Russia's War in Georgia: Causes and Implications for Georgia and the War.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Maass, A.-S. (2017). EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation. p. 144.

³²⁰ Government of Georgia. (2008). Letter from Nicolas Sarkozy, 14 August 2008: Russian Aggression of Georgia. Six Point Peace Plan. Le Président de la République. Protocole d'accord. State Ministry for Reconciliation and Civic Equalities. <http://new.smr.gov.ge/Uploads/9bbbc7.pdf>.

³²¹ Maass, A.-S. (2017). EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation. p. 144.

³²² Sarkozy, N. (2008). L'Union européenne et la Russie dans la gouvernance mondiale. Politique Etrangère. Politique Etrangère 2008/4 Hiver, 723–732.

increasingly evident. However, on the part of the Union, there was a will to continue to dialogue with Russia. The perspective of the Union in relations with Moscow was evident from the conclusions of the Council of the European Union in September 2008, in which the Council underlined that “We are convinced that it is in Russia’s interest not to isolate itself from Europe. We expect Russia to behave in a responsible manner, honoring all its commitments. The Union will remain vigilant; the European Council requests the Council, with the Commission, to conduct a careful, in-depth examination of the [...] various aspects of EU-Russia relations; this evaluation must begin now and continue in the run-up to the forthcoming summit.”³²³

The European Commission shared the same constructive opinion as the European Council, where on November 5, 2008, it published a statement in which it stated that “the EU can approach its relations with Russia with a certain confidence. Economically, Russia needs the EU. The EU is an important market for the export of its raw materials, notably energy. [...] The recent financial crisis has underlined how acutely Russia needs to modernize and diversify its economy. The EU is the natural partner for this process and is the main source of its foreign investments; Russia desires engagement with the EU for its purposes, for example, to achieve visa abolition.”³²⁴ Despite the worsening of relations between Brussels and Moscow, Russia’s invasion of Georgia and subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states did not result in a political crisis.

In conclusion, the Union proved to be poorly coordinated in its response, and only with the mediating role assumed by Sarkozy and the ceasefire agreement did it play a role in the conflict.³²⁵ Consequently, due to the solitary intervention of the French leader, the Russian perception was that Brussels would not intervene in future crises in the post-Soviet area, leaving Moscow a free hand in terms of influence. The “business as usual” approach of a good part of the European political class after the Russian military intervention in Georgia turned into a significant strategic mistake. This miscalculation crystallized Russia’s perception of the European Union as a divided and hesitant actor, paving the way for a decade of growing instability in the post-Soviet space.

³²³ Council of the European Union (2008). Presidency conclusions. (OR.fr). 12594/08. CONCL 3. Extraordinary European Council, Brussels. 1 September 2008.

³²⁴ European Commission (2008). Review of EU- Russia relations. Memo/08/678. Brussels, 5 November 2008. http://europa.eu7rapid/press-release_MEMO-08-678_en.htm?locale=en.

³²⁵ Maass, A.-S. (2017). EU-Russia Relations, 1999-2015. From Courtship to Confrontation. p. 144.

Chapter IV: The meaning and impact of the Fifth Enlargement

4.1: Retrospective on the Eastern expansion

On May 1, 2004, the European Union expanded to twenty-five member states, marking the culmination of a process that had begun in 1989 with the democratization of many countries belonging to the post-Soviet space. The fifth enlargement was the largest in the Union's history, involving simultaneous negotiations with multiple countries. It also required a longer and more demanding engagement process than previous accessions.³²⁶ Institutional reforms played a pivotal role in preparing the Union for this key event, notably the signing of significant treaties that reshaped the legislative and institutional framework of the Union to accommodate new member states: the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1997, and the Treaty of Nice in 2001.³²⁷³²⁸³²⁹ The fifth enlargement also brought 100 million new citizens into the Union, although it increased the EU's GDP by only 5%.³³⁰

Despite its significance, the fifth enlargement was poorly communicated to the public. EU leaders failed to explain its potential benefits, both before and after May 1, 2004.³³¹ This communication gap contributed to widespread public misunderstanding and the proliferation of negative perceptions around the European Union. Slogans such as “they are taking our jobs,” “they are living off our welfare systems,” and “they are stealing from our limited resource pool” captured this general sentiment among many citizens of the older member states.³³² This situation was further complicated by the French European Constitution referendum, held in May 2005, which experienced the victory of the “no” campaign, with 55% of the French voters rejecting the ratification of the

³²⁶ O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. Abingdon: Routledge. p. 172.

³²⁷ European Parliament (2012). Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)/Treaty of Maastricht. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/maastricht-treaty>.

³²⁸ European Parliament (1997). Treaty of Amsterdam. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/treaty-of-amsterdam>.

³²⁹ European Parliament (2001). Treaty of Nice. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/treaty-of-nice#:~:text=The%20aim%20of%20the%20Treaty,well%20as%20Cyprus%20and%20Malta>.

³³⁰ The Economist (2004). A club in need for a new vision. <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2004/04/29/a-club-in-need-of-a-new-vision>.

³³¹ Ockrent, C. (2005). The price of arrogance. *International Herald Tribune*.

³³² O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. p. 172.

constitution of the European Union, revealing growing skepticism toward European integration.³³³

Contrary to the fears of the European public, however, the fifth enlargement brought positive benefits to the countries of the Union. For example, following the removal of remaining trade barriers, the indicator related to exports and imports between the Union and Central and Eastern Europe increased at double-digit rates in 2004.³³⁴ According to the European Commission, in that time framework, farmers' incomes in Central and Eastern Europe rose by approximately 50%.³³⁵ Furthermore, the countries that joined in 2004 experienced a GDP growth rate of 5%, up from 3.7% in 2003.³³⁶ At the same time, concerns over job delocalization and mass from new to old member states did not materialize. Nonetheless, these positive outcomes remained largely unrecognized by European citizens, highlighting the persistent disconnection between European institutions and European citizens regarding the enlargement process.

During the fifth enlargement, a significant difference emerged in the perception of the process between the pre-existing citizens of the European Union and those who became European citizens on May 1, 2004. In fact, while the latter expressed enthusiasm at joining the broader European family, many citizens of the old member states felt threatened. They viewed Brussels as a bureaucratic power that imposed regulations, increasing a growing sense of disaffection towards the European institutions.³³⁷ Their feeling was that the European bureaucracy was hindering economic development, constraining national growth, and exacerbating inequalities. As a result, despite the important historical significance of the fifth enlargement in advancing European integration, future enlargement rounds could be perceived not as opportunities but as a source of additional bureaucracy and economic strain.

Furthermore, the 2004 enlargement symbolized the post-Cold War reunification of the European continent, bringing twenty-five member states united by shared cultural foundations.³³⁸ This cultural dimension remains a cornerstone of the European Union's

³³³ Deloy, C. & Levy, H. (2005). 29th May 2005, a devastated landscape. Fondation Robert Schuman. <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/monitor/402>.

³³⁴ Katinka, B. (2004). EU Enlargement: How to Reap the Benefits. *Economic Trends* 2.

³³⁵ Wagstyl, S. (2005). Accession states reap rewards of EU membership. *Financial Times*.

³³⁶ O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. p. 173.

³³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 174.

³³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 175.

identity, reinforcing the Europeanist vision for the creation of an ever-closer integrated Union. In particular, the importance of the cultural factor was highlighted by the Maastricht Treaty in its preamble, noting that the Union is “drawing inspiration from the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe.”³³⁹ Moreover, Article III of the Maastricht Treaty underscores the European Union’s commitment to “respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and [...] ensure that Europe’s cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced.”³⁴⁰

The European Union also represents a cultural sphere united by shared values despite the economic disparities that, in 2004, distinguished the old and new member states of the Union. This vision was echoed by Pope Benedict XVI, who, upon becoming Pope in 2005 following the death of Pope John Paul II, commented on the prospect of Turkey joining the European Union by stating that “Europe is a cultural continent, not a geographic one.”³⁴¹ Indeed, since its foundation, the European Union has been rooted in Christian democratic values, shaped by the political visions of Alcide De Gasperi, Robert Schuman, and Konrad Adenauer, three of the founding fathers of the European community.³⁴² While secularism constitutes a constitutional pillar across the member countries, cultural affinity was a key factor of convergence among the countries of the fifth enlargement.³⁴³

Additionally, the fifth expansion shifted the European Union’s center of gravity eastward. This geographic reorientation prompted the European institutions to deepen their strategic engagement with Eastern Europe and to extend the scope of their geopolitical and security objectives. The enlargement was not only economic and political but also had important implications for the Union’s security architecture.³⁴⁴ As stated in Article 42 of the Treaty on European Union, the Common Security and Defense Policy forms an “integral part of the common foreign and security policy” of the Union.³⁴⁵ The Article further provides that “The common security and defense policy shall include the

³³⁹ European Parliament (2012). Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)/Treaty of Maastricht.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Cohen, R. (2005). Guilt, reconciliation and the German Pope. *International Herald Tribune*.

³⁴² European Union (2025). EU pioneers. https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/eu-pioneers_en.

³⁴³ O'Brennan, J. (2006). *The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union*. p. 175.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, p.176.

³⁴⁵ European Union (2012). Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union.

progressive framing of a common Union defense policy” and that “Member States shall undertake progressively to improve their military capabilities.”³⁴⁶

The European Union is, therefore, a Union that also promotes the collective security of its members through solidarity and mutual commitment among its Member States. This aspect proved particularly attractive for the countries of Eastern Europe following the Cold War, especially in light of their proximity to the Russian Federation. In this context, Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union states that “If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter.”³⁴⁷ This mutual defense clause establishes that, in the event of armed conflict, member states are obligated to assist the attacked member state through bilateral cooperation.³⁴⁸ Given that many countries of the European Union also belong to the Atlantic Alliance, this provision confirms the Union’s will to function as a security community, guaranteeing the safety of all its Member States.

Notably, the fifth enlargement represented a turning point in the evolution of the European institutional architecture, shaping the Union’s institutional framework. In this regard, the eastern enlargement prompted the Union to formalize the guidelines and define the criteria for membership.³⁴⁹ With the enhanced powers of the European Commission following the Maastricht Treaty, the Union began to accommodate a larger membership, adapting its regulatory and institutional structure.³⁵⁰ As early as the European Council summit in Copenhagen in 1993, the Union defined the rules that defined the conditions for accession through the establishment of the Copenhagen criteria.³⁵¹ These included both political and economic requirements, and the European Commission was entrusted with monitoring and assessing the progress made by the candidate countries from Eastern Europe.

³⁴⁶ Ibid.

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ European Council on Foreign Relations (2015). Article 42.7: An explainer. https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_article_427_an_explainer5019/.

³⁴⁹ O'Brennan, J. (2006). The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. p. 178.

³⁵⁰ European Parliament (2012). Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)/Treaty of Maastricht.

³⁵¹ European Union (2025). Accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:accession_criteria_copenhagen.

In October 1997, the European institutions initiated the first concrete attempt to reform the Union's institutional framework in preparation for the fifth enlargement.³⁵² The Union has, therefore, begun adapting its decision-making processes, revising the majority required for decisions that previously required unanimity to ensure that the institutional mechanisms of the Union remain functional with the increase in membership.³⁵³ The entry into force of the Treaty of Nice further strengthened the Union's institutional architecture, enhancing the legislative powers of the European Parliament and extending the scope of qualified majority voting within the Council.³⁵⁴ The fifth enlargement thus required a substantial evolution of the European institutional system, which has not only facilitated the entry of ten new member states in 2004 but also positioned the Union to manage future enlargement rounds and to respond to the global challenges of the twenty-first century.

Another decisive factor in the success of the fifth enlargement was the political will demonstrated by the European leaders. Particularly, Presidents Delors, Santer, and Prodi must be credited for achieving this objective, as they guided the European Commission through this complex process that led to the most significant expansion of the European Union. Their leadership was instrumental in shaping the enlargement policy agenda, structuring the negotiation framework, and advancing the political consensus in Brussels.³⁵⁵ Also of significant importance was the extraordinary contribution provided by the Swedish and Danish Presidencies of the Council, which demonstrated, notwithstanding their limited population size, a strong pro-European spirit, employing innovative institutional strategies to facilitate eastern enlargement.³⁵⁶ Although the European Parliament played a relatively marginal role in the enlargement process, it nonetheless exerted influence by promoting the Union's fundamental values, democracy, legitimacy, justice, and freedom, shaping the broader institutional and normative environment.³⁵⁷

Finally, the true success of the European institutions during the fifth enlargement lay in their ability to strike a balance between the integration of ten new member states

³⁵² European Parliament (1997). Treaty of Amsterdam.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ European Parliament (2001). Treaty of Nice.

³⁵⁵ O'Brennan, J. (2006). The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. p. 180.

³⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 180.

³⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 181.

and, at the same time, ensuring compliance with EU norms and legal regulations. This enlargement stands as a significant achievement for both the member states and the European institutions, reflecting the Union's capacity to apply the "deepening and widening" concept. As such, this success remains one of the most remarkable milestones in the history of European integration and will serve as a fundamental precedent for future enlargement processes.

4.2: EU Missteps during the Fifth Enlargement

With the fifth enlargement, the European Union not only expanded in terms of membership but also faced significant challenges in relation to its political institutions. The European Union was insufficiently prepared for the Eastern expansion, underestimating the scope of institutional and procedural transformations necessary to ensure effective governance in a Union with twenty-five and, subsequently, twenty-seven members.³⁵⁸ In parallel, the Eastern enlargement exposed strategic missteps in the Union's approach toward the Russian Federation. Opportunities for deeper cooperation, such as the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) signed in 1994, led to a lack of opportunities for closer cooperation between the two parties, contributing to a growing sense of mutual misunderstanding in the years following the enlargement.³⁵⁹

To prepare its institutional structure for the fifth enlargement process, the European Union undertook a series of reforms through successive treaties. The Maastricht Treaty in 1993, the Amsterdam Treaty in 1999, and the Treaty of Nice in 2003 sought to adapt the Union's structures to accommodate new member states.³⁶⁰ However, the Treaty of Amsterdam failed to deliver substantial institutional reform, prompting the convening of an Intergovernmental Conference that led to the Treaty of Nice, which aimed to enhance the legislative powers of the European Parliament. Moreover, it extended

³⁵⁸ Savasan, Z. (2012). A brief overview on EU institutional change from foundation to Lisbon. *Ankara Review of European Studies*. https://doi.org/10.1501/Avraras_0000000172. p. 62.

³⁵⁹ European Union (1994). Consolidated version of the Agreement on partnership and cooperation establishing a partnership between the European Communities, their Member States, and the Russian Federation.

³⁶⁰ Katz, P. (2003). The Treaty of Nice and European Union Enlargement: The Political, Economic, and Social Consequences of Ratifying the Treaty of Nice. *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law*. <https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/jil/vol24/iss1/4>. p. 226.

qualified majority voting in the Council, partially improving the efficiency of the European institutional mechanisms in an enlarged Union.³⁶¹

Nevertheless, significant institutional challenges persisted. The rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in national referendums held in France and the Netherlands on May 29, 2005, and June 1, 2005, respectively, marked a turning point, stalling the momentum for deeper integration and internal reform.³⁶² For this reason, in response to this institutional deadlock and in light of the need to adapt the institutional structure of the European institutions following the fifth enlargement and the accession of Bulgaria and Romania, European leaders agreed at the Brussels European Council in June 2007 on the necessity of drafting a new “Reform Treaty.”³⁶³ This process culminated on December 13, 2007, with the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force on December 1, 2009.³⁶⁴

The Treaty of Lisbon introduced substantial institutional reforms aimed at enhancing the efficiency and democratic legitimacy of the Union’s institutions. Firstly, as regards the European Commission, Article 17.7 of the Treaty on the European Union laid the legal foundation for the “Spitzenkandidaten process,” whereby the European Parliament elections increased political significance and legitimacy, linking the selection of the President of the Commission to the outcome of the popular elections.³⁶⁵ Secondly, with regard to the European Parliament, the Treaty of Lisbon established a maximum of 750 seats plus the President, with the minimum number of seats per member state to be six and the maximum number to be ninety-six.³⁶⁶ Thirdly, as for decision-making within the Council of the European Union, the Treaty of Lisbon introduced a reweighting of votes through a revised system of qualified majority voting. Indeed, according to Articles 16.3 and 16.4 TEU, “The Council shall act by a qualified majority except where the Treaties provide otherwise,” ensuring more efficiency in an enlarged Union.³⁶⁷ Finally,

³⁶¹ Ibid. p. 253.

³⁶² Savasan, Z. (2012). A brief overview on EU institutional change from foundation to Lisbon. p. 62.

³⁶³ Ibid. p. 72.

³⁶⁴ European Union (2007). Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=OJ%3AC%3A2007%3A306%3ATOC>.

³⁶⁵ European Parliament (2019). Election of the President of the European Commission - Understanding the Spitzenkandidaten process. European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS). [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630264/EPRS_BRI\(2018\)630264_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/630264/EPRS_BRI(2018)630264_EN.pdf).

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

the Treaty of Lisbon formally established the European Council for the first time, aiming at strengthening the role of the national leadership in the Union's policymaking.

With the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Union and its institutions regained functional efficiency in the aftermath of the fifth enlargement, introducing significant reforms to its institutional framework. These changes were essential to enable the Union to operate effectively, as the Treaty of Amsterdam and the Treaty of Nice had proven inadequate for managing the complexities of an enlarged Union.³⁶⁸ In anticipation of future enlargements, the Union and its member states will need proactive preparation by amending the EU Treaties in view of future enlargements and introducing new institutional structures and rules, aligning them with the evolving dynamics of European integration.

In addition to the inadequate institutional preparation, one of the Union's key strategic missteps during the fifth enlargement concerned the strategic depth of its relationship with the Russian Federation. Relations between the European Union and Russia trace back to 1988, when the "Joint Declaration on the Establishment of Relations between the European Economic Community and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance" was signed, followed by the "Agreement between the European Community, Euratom and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Trade and Economic Cooperation" of 1990.³⁶⁹³⁷⁰ Subsequently, a more legal framework was established in 1994 with the EU-Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which established the legal basis for their relationship.³⁷¹ This partnership further deepened in 2003, with the proposal of the so-called "Four Common Spaces," which were officially adopted in 2005, forming part of the Union's broader "Wider Europe" policy to develop further its relations with its eastern neighbors, including Russia.³⁷²

³⁶⁸ Savasan, Z. (2012). A brief overview on EU institutional change from foundation to Lisbon. p. 82.

³⁶⁹ European Union (1988). Signing of the EC/COMECON joint declaration. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_88_97.

³⁷⁰ European Union (1990). Agreement between the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on trade and commercial and economic cooperation. Official Journal L 68, 15 March 1990, 2–17.

³⁷¹ European Union (1994). Consolidated version of the Agreement on partnership and cooperation establishing a partnership between the European Communities, their Member States, and the Russian Federation. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A21997A1128%2801%29>.

³⁷² European Commission (2003). Wider Europe — Neighbourhood: Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament. <https://aei.pitt.edu/38141/>.

Under the PCA, both Brussels and Moscow committed to building a mutually beneficial partnership.³⁷³ Furthermore, in the early 2000s, the Kremlin even regarded the EU as “one of its main political and economic partners,” confirming that Russia would pursue an “intensive, stable and long-term cooperation” with the EU.³⁷⁴ Nevertheless, despite the willingness to cooperate, the European Union expected that at some point, Russia would overcome the Soviet legacy, aligning with the PCA’s normative framework.³⁷⁵ The PCA is crucial for understanding the asymmetrical foundations of the EU-Russia relationship. In its preamble, the PCA highlights the “importance of the historical links existing between the Community, its Member States and Russia and the common values that they share [...], [and] the paramount importance of the rule of law and respect for human rights, particularly those of minorities, the establishment of a multi-party system with free and democratic elections and economic liberalization aimed at setting up a market economy.”³⁷⁶ These normative elements were foundational to the legal framework between the European Union and the Russian Federation, reflecting the Union’s expectations towards Russia. However, with the election of Vladimir Putin in 2000, Moscow’s democratic backsliding undermined the normative foundations upon which the Union had sought to build its strategic relationship.

Furthermore, the preamble of the PCA acknowledges the Union’s willingness to provide “technical assistance [...] for the implementation of economic reform in Russia and the development of economic cooperation,” describing Russia as “a country with an economy in transition and that continued progress towards a market economy.”³⁷⁷ For this reason, such phrasing underscores the power imbalance embedded within the words of the PCA, positioning the Union as a major power in relation to Russia. This asymmetry was further underscored by President Putin in 2003, who declared that “[i]n order to

³⁷³ Schmidt-Felzman, A. (2016). The breakdown of the EU’s strategic partnership with Russia: from strategic patience towards a strategic failure. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*. Vol. 29, No. 1, 99–127. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2015.1130096>. p. 105.

³⁷⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia (2000). Foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation. <http://archive.mid.ru/Bl.nsf/arh/1EC8DC08180306614325699C003B5FF0?OpenDocument>.

³⁷⁵ Schmidt-Felzman, A. (2016). The breakdown of the EU’s strategic partnership with Russia: from strategic patience towards a strategic failure. p. 105.

³⁷⁶ European Union (1994). Consolidated version of the Agreement on partnership and cooperation establishing a partnership between the European Communities, their Member States, and the Russian Federation.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

become an equal partner [of the European Union], [Russia] needs to do a lot in our own country.”³⁷⁸

Moreover, while the European leaders believed that a shared commitment to liberal-democratic values would generate mutual benefit, Moscow increasingly rejected the EU’s value-driven conditionality, defending its right to pursue reforms unilaterally in accordance with its rules and regulations.³⁷⁹ While the European Union sought to export its democratic values, as envisaged in the PCA, Russia’s leaders envisioned a “common European home” in order to improve its internal economy rather than establish closer collaboration with the European Union.³⁸⁰ In this regard, the Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 made it clear that the Kremlin aimed to secure “firm and prestigious positions in the world community [...] consistent with the interests of the Russian Federation as a great power, as one of the most influential centers of the modern world.”³⁸¹

The document further stressed that Russia would define its external partnerships based solely on their relevance to its “national interests.”³⁸² In contrast, the European Union’s approach to the fifth enlargement was based on the assumption that the states in Central and Eastern Europe, through accession conditionality, would progressively adopt democratic reforms and the *acquis communautaire* in their respective national frameworks. This model was implicitly extended to Russia, as the Union hoped that close cooperation would result in a significant step to encourage the promotion of democratic values. However, the Union underestimated the likelihood that Russia would resist internal reforms perceived as imposed by an external entity and in contrast with the Kremlin’s national interests.

In conclusion, the European Union can draw an important lesson from this experience: the notion of “strategic patience,”³⁸³ as economic assistance and political engagement must balance the respect for the Union’s core values and the geopolitical realm. In this regard, conditionality linked to democratic reforms must remain a

³⁷⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia (2003). Russian President Vladimir Putin’s Interview to the American Newspaper New York Times, Novo-Ogaryovo. <http://archive.mid.ru/Bl.nsf/arh/5101C9EDDCDA246243256DB90040776A?OpenDocument>.

³⁷⁹ Schmidt-Felzman, A. (2016). The breakdown of the EU’s strategic partnership with Russia: from strategic patience towards a strategic failure. p. 107.

³⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 108.

³⁸¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia (2000). Foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation.

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Schmidt-Felzman, A. (2016). The breakdown of the EU’s strategic partnership with Russia: from strategic patience towards a strategic failure. p. 108.

cornerstone of the Union's approach in its neighborhood. However, when dealing with authoritarian states such as Russia, the Union should seek to build cooperation on areas of mutual interest, such as the economy and security, while maintaining a firm commitment to its principles. A closer cooperation between the European Union and the Russian Federation can only emerge from a foundation of realistic expectations. In this sense, given their geographical proximity and their respective geopolitical ambitions, Brussels and Moscow shall establish a framework of collaboration grounded in strategic coexistence and selective cooperation.

4.3 Framing the future of EU integration

More than two decades have passed since the European Union's fifth enlargement, marking a symbolic turning point for the reunification of the European continent after the two world wars and the Cold War, opening the door to post-Soviet states aspiring to join the Union. The subsequent 2007 accession of Bulgaria and Romania during the sixth enlargement revealed early cracks in the enlargement process.³⁸⁴ Indeed, unlike their predecessors, Sofia and Bucharest were admitted under accelerated conditions despite concerns over corruption and institutional readiness. Their admission raised substantive doubts about the robustness and consistency of the accession criteria established in Copenhagen in 1993.³⁸⁵

In the early 2000s, the process of democratization in Eastern Europe was often seen as closely tied to European Union integration, with new liberal democratic states seeking legitimacy and consolidation through their membership in the Union.³⁸⁶ However, the trend that has accompanied some of the European countries following the fifth enlargement is that of backsliding on EU democratic values. This regression calls into question the long-term effectiveness of the Copenhagen criteria necessary to join the European Union as a minimum legal constraint. In 1993, they represented a solid bulwark in defense of European values; twenty years after the fifth enlargement, they must be

³⁸⁴ European Union (2025). EU Enlargement. https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en.

³⁸⁵ Ott, A. (2025). 20 years of the EU's big bang enlargement: From the return to Europe to the escape from Europe? *Maastricht Journal of European and Comparative Law*, Volume 31, Issue 5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1023263X251318611>.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

revisited and strengthened to ensure not only compliance at the point of entry into the Union but also sustained adherence to democratic norms after accession.³⁸⁷

The first of the Copenhagen criteria, the requirement for “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities,” is a fundamental provision to ensure that candidate countries align with the core democratic values of the European Union.³⁸⁸ The post-accession experience following the fifth enlargement exposed the limitation of this criterion. Notably, a few years after they entered the Union, countries such as Hungary since 2010 with Viktor Orbán and Poland from 2015 to 2023 with Mateusz Morawiecki have witnessed significant democratic backsliding despite initially fulfilling the accession criteria.³⁸⁹ Although the Union has significant norms in its treaty bodies to discourage member states from non-compliance with the community *acquis*, their application has often been hindered by institutional and political constraints.

Pursuant to the applicable EU rules, when a member state of the European Union violates the fundamental values of the Union, enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty or the European Union, in accordance with Article 7 of the Treaty on the European Union, “the Council, acting by a qualified majority, may decide to suspend certain of the rights deriving from the application of the Treaties to the Member State in question, including the voting rights of the representative of the government of that Member State in the Council.”³⁹⁰ In parallel, Article 258 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union empower the European Commission to initiate an infringement proceedings if “considers that a Member State has failed to fulfill an obligation under the Treaties, [...]” and, consequently, “the State concerned does not comply with the opinion within the period laid down by the Commission, the latter may bring the matter before the Court of Justice of the European Union.”³⁹¹

Despite these legal instruments, the Copenhagen criteria, while foreseeing substantial regulatory and institutional reform as a precondition for accession, do not

³⁸⁷ European Union (2025). Accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM:accession_criteria_copenhagen.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ott, A. (2025). 20 years of the EU's big bang enlargement: From the return to Europe to the escape from Europe?

³⁹⁰ European Parliament (2012). Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)/Treaty of Maastricht.

³⁹¹ European Union (2012). Consolidated version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

sufficiently ensure the continued respect of European values.³⁹² As the Union is nowadays preparing a second major enlargement to the east, it has begun to rethink the criteria for access to the Union, implementing qualitative assessment that was lacking in the previous evaluation process, as a widespread concern is that the European institutions did not apply the political criteria comprehensively or rigorously in the process for meeting the accession conditions.³⁹³ As a consequence, more than three decades after their first adoption, the Copenhagen criteria now appear overly broad and imprecise, limiting their ability to secure durable democratic reform, partially explaining subsequent backsliding observed in several member states.³⁹⁴

In preparation for future rounds of enlargement, the European Union is actively refining its rules, regulations, and institutional framework. On March 20, 2024, the European Commission adopted the “Communication on Pre-Enlargement Reforms and Policy Review” in order to prepare the European institutions for an enlarged Union, as the Union “must deepen as it widens.”³⁹⁵ For the European Commission and President Ursula Von Der Leyen, the key to the success of enlarging the Union lies in “adjusting EU policies ahead of accession, ensuring a rigorous accession process, targeted assistance and, where needed, transitions.” Furthermore, the communication, based on the 2023 State of the Union address by the President of the Commission, stresses that “by drawing on the lessons learned from previous enlargements [emphasis added] and further improving our policies at 27, we are becoming better prepared for a larger Union.” [...]

The European institutions, therefore, now require candidate countries to meet the Copenhagen criteria, upholding democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights, as baseline conditions, but also to “enhancing connectivity, [...] improving the commitments on climate and environment change, [...] improving food quality and security, [...] creating the conditions for social, economic and territorial convergence [...], and

³⁹² Panchulidze, E. & Youngs, R. (2024). Beyond the Copenhagen Criteria: Rethinking the Political Conditions of EU Accession. Carnegie Europe. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/rethinking-eu-accession-criteria?center=europe&lang=en>.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ European Commission (2024). Commission prepares for pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews. Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-prepares-pre-enlargement-reforms-and-policy-reviews-2024-03-20_en.

delivering strong security commitments, migration and border management.”³⁹⁶ As noted by Maros Sefčovič, Executive Vice-President for European Green Deal, Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight, the enlargement process today is viewed as “a geostrategic investment, increasing the EU’s political and economic weight on the global stage. [...] To fully seize the opportunities of this geopolitical investment, both the Union and future Member States must be well-prepared. This communication is the first stepping-stone towards EU reforms that will make us ready for a larger Union, with a series of in-depth policy reviews to begin in early 2025.”³⁹⁷

Furthermore, the European Union is currently engaged in negotiations for what may become its second “Big Bang” enlargement in Eastern Europe. As of December 2024, the current countries officially in the process of joining the European Union are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye,³⁹⁸ and Ukraine, while Kosovo, at the moment, is recognized as a potential candidate country.³⁹⁹ Given the geographical distribution of these states, this upcoming enlargement will primarily focus on the Western Balkans (*see Map 1 below*).

Candidate countries, however, are processing through the accession process at various speeds, depending on their compliance with the Copenhagen criteria and Article 49 of the Treaty on the European Union.⁴⁰⁰ Among them, Montenegro gained official candidate status in 2010 and is currently the most advanced candidate country in the process, having also declared its ambition to join the EU by 2028.⁴⁰¹ Moreover, accession negotiations are underway with Albania and Serbia, while in March 2020, the Council agreed to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia.⁴⁰² In December 2023, the

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ On November 24, 2016, the European Parliament adopted, by a large majority (479 votes in favour, 37 against and 107 abstentions), a resolution which included a call for the negotiations on Turkey’s EU accession to be frozen. Parliament strongly condemned the disproportionate measures taken by Ankara following the attempted coup on 15 July 2016. Source: European Parliament (2016). Freezing the negotiations on Turkey’s accession to the European Union. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-8-2016-009001_EN.html.

³⁹⁹ European Commission (2025). EU Enlargement.

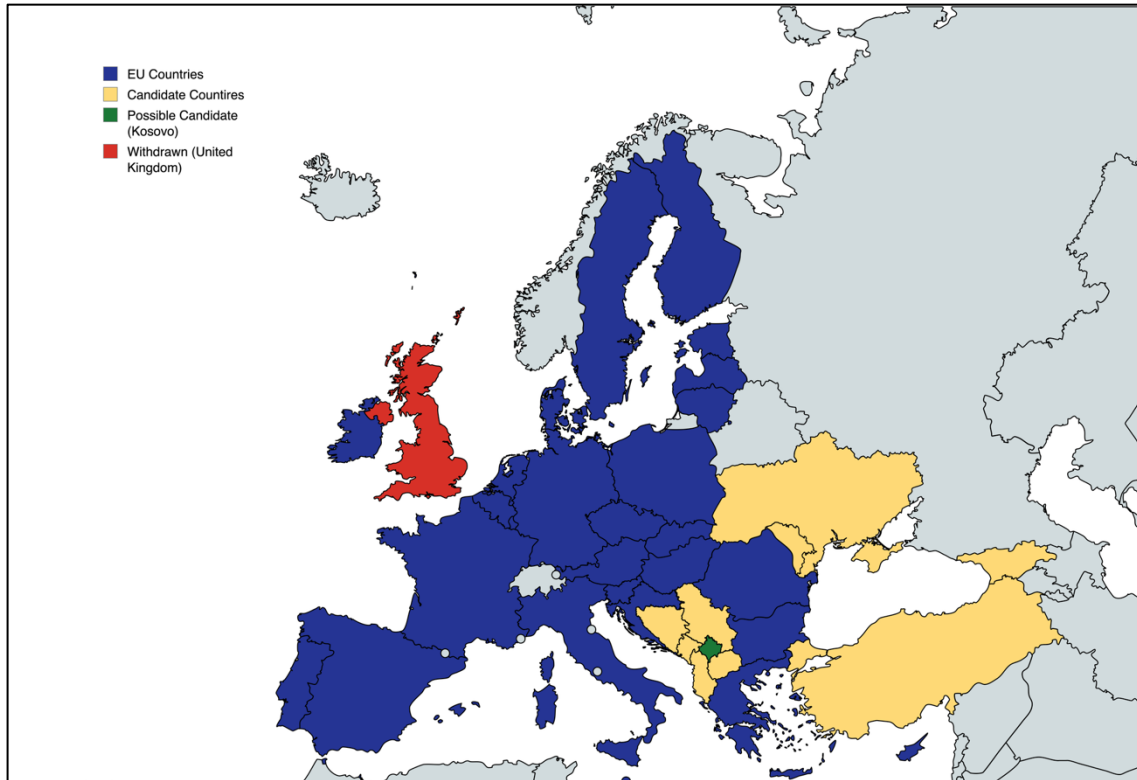
⁴⁰⁰ European Union (2025). Accession criteria (Copenhagen criteria). European Parliament (2012). Treaty on European Union (TEU)/Treaty of Maastricht.

⁴⁰¹ European Economic and Social Committee (2024). The EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee: Montenegro is advancing in the EU accession path. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/eu-montenegro-joint-consultative-committee-montenegro-advancing-eu-accession-path>.

⁴⁰² European Union External Action (2025). The EU and the Western Balkans: towards a common future. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-western-balkans-towards-common-future_en.

European Council endorsed the opening of future accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has since gained formal candidate status.⁴⁰³ Kosovo, by contrast, remains only a potential candidate for EU membership.⁴⁰⁴

Map 1: Current European Union member states and candidate countries⁴⁰⁵



Among the other eastern candidate countries, Moldova has recently taken a significant step toward EU integration. In October 2024, the country held a referendum to include in its constitution the commitment to joining the EU, with a narrow 50.5% voting in favor.⁴⁰⁶ The vote in Moldova was combined with presidential elections, in which Maia Sandu, the pro-European incumbent, secured re-election in a run-off held in November 2024.⁴⁰⁷ Meanwhile, in Georgia, since the Georgian Dream party suspended EU accession talks in November 2024, Georgian citizens are demonstrating significant

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Map created with mapchart.net.

⁴⁰⁶ Rainsford, S. & Gozzi, L. (2024). Moldova says 'Yes' to pro-EU constitutional changes by tiny margin. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1wnr5qdx7o>.

⁴⁰⁷ Sauer, P. (2024). Maia Sandu wins second term in Moldovan election in rebuke to Kremlin. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/03/moldovans-vote-in-presidential-runoff-amid-claims-of-russian-interference>.

support for the Union integration while denouncing the government's increasingly authoritarian tendencies and its alignment with Moscow.⁴⁰⁸

Additionally, despite having obtained candidate status only in June 2022, Ukraine's future within the European Union appears to be increasingly defined.⁴⁰⁹ In April 2025, following a €300 million investment from the European Investment Bank to Ukraine, the President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, reaffirmed that "[The European Union] commitment to Ukraine is firm as ever. We work across the board to strengthen the country and support a just and lasting peace on Ukraine's terms. [...] We are backing Ukraine's impressive reform efforts and deepening our ties, from space, security, and defense to building a thriving business environment. We are with you."⁴¹⁰

Echoing this sentiment, Kaja Kallas, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, stated, "While the EU helps Ukraine defend itself from Russia's aggression, we are supporting the country at every step on its accession path. From creating opportunities to connect the EU and Ukrainian business sectors to bringing Ukraine into important EU programs such as Copernicus, our relationship is only getting closer. Even in the midst of war, Ukraine has shown time and again its dedication to putting in the work. Today, it is as clear as ever where Ukraine's future lies."⁴¹¹ Similarly, Marta Kos, Commissioner for Enlargement, noted that "Ukraine [is] firmly within the European family and [is] accelerating its path to EU accession."⁴¹²

While deeper integration with several European countries may have its limitations and challenges, the European Union has consistently demonstrated, even before the Fifth Enlargement, a thoughtful approach to the expansion process, striking a careful balance between deepening integration and widening membership.⁴¹³ The European institutions

⁴⁰⁸ Victor, C. (2025). Hope and turmoil: The EU's role in securing Georgia's democratic future. European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu/article/hope-and-turmoil-the-eus-role-in-securing-georgias-democratic-future/>.

⁴⁰⁹ European Council (2022). European Council conclusions, 23-24 June 2022. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/06/24/european-council-conclusions-23-24-june-2022/>.

⁴¹⁰ European Union (2025). EU reaffirms unwavering support for Ukraine. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-reaffirms-unwavering-support-ukraine-2025-04-09_en.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ Ott, A. (2025). 20 years of the EU's big bang enlargement: From the return to Europe to the escape from Europe?

have already overcome complicated periods following that enlargement, including the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, responding and adapting to contemporary challenges with a blend of institutional rigor and flexibility. To all intents and purposes, one of the Union's greatest strengths lies in its ability to maintain momentum in the integration process, even during moments of profound crisis, transforming external threats into opportunities for collective advancement, as seen with the Next Generation EU and, more recently, with the ReArm Europe Plan, also known as Readiness 2030.⁴¹⁴ The European Union has represented a bulwark of human rights since its creation, and it will once again be ready to welcome new member states into its institutional framework, upholding its principles and values.

At the same time, as the Union prepares a new phase of enlargement, it must consider the broader geopolitical implications, particularly in relation to the growing tension with the Russian Federation. Any further expansion eastward is likely to be perceived by the Kremlin as a new geopolitical provocation. For this reason, the Union must also seek to re-engage with Russia through a more nuanced and strategic approach, while remaining firmly committed to its democratic principles.

⁴¹⁴ European Union (2025). NextGenerationEU: for a stronger, more resilient Europe. https://next-generation-eu.europa.eu/index_en. European Union (2025). Acting on defence to protect Europeans. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/future-european-defence_en.

Conclusion

The European Union has undergone a remarkable process of transformation, integration, and renewal since its creation more than seventy years ago. Starting as the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, the Union evolved into an important supranational entity, with more power and responsibilities. In 2004, the Union expanded its membership to twenty-five member states through the accession of ten countries from Central and Eastern Europe.⁴¹⁵ This thesis aims to offer an in-depth analysis of the European Union's fifth enlargement process, focusing on the history of the big bang enlargement and its relations with Russia in the 1990s and early 2000s. The study seeks to assess the impact of the enlargement, addressing the following questions: *What were the main missteps of the European Union during its fifth enlargement, and how did these affect EU-Russia relations?*

The first chapter explored the early stages of the relations between the European Union and Russia, which formally began in 1988 with the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Establishment of Relations between the European Economic Community and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance.⁴¹⁶ The initial years of cooperation were economically beneficial for both sides, culminating with the signing of the Partnership and Community Agreement in 1994.⁴¹⁷ This agreement laid the foundation for the relationship between the Union and Russia, aiming to foster a free trade area and establish a political dialogue that would enhance stability, security, democracy, and human rights across the European continent. However, the relationship between Brussels and Moscow was inherently asymmetrical, as the Union expected Russia to align with its norms and standards without proposing a prospect for membership. By the early 2000s, despite growing economic interdependence, the two actors began to become politically distant, indicating that trade relations alone were insufficient to produce a meaningful political convergence and alignment.

⁴¹⁵ European Commission (2025). EU Enlargement. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-enlargement_en.

⁴¹⁶ European Union (1988). Signing of the EC/COMECON joint declaration. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_88_97.

⁴¹⁷ European Union (1994). Consolidated version of the Agreement on partnership and cooperation establishing a partnership between the European Communities, their Member States, and the Russian Federation. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A21997A1128%2801%29>.

The second chapter examined the historical evolution of the process that culminated in the Union's fifth enlargement. The Delors Commission already deployed the dual strategy of deepening and widening.⁴¹⁸ This period marked a significant step toward the creation of a more cohesive Union while simultaneously laying the groundwork for the future inclusion of new members. Moreover, the launch of the PHARE program in 1989 and the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 were instrumental in preparing the European institutions and the candidate states for enlargement.⁴¹⁹ In the latter half of the 1990s, the Santer Commission advanced the Agenda 2000, a strategic plan that guided the enlargement process with a balanced and cautious approach.⁴²⁰ In 1997, the signing of the Treaty of Amsterdam further reformed the Union's institutions in anticipation of new enlargements.⁴²¹ That same year, accession negotiations officially began with five candidate countries: Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia.⁴²² These were followed by Cyprus in 1998, and in 1999, the member states decided to open negotiations with additional candidates from Eastern Europe: Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, and Slovakia.⁴²³ Under the Prodi Commission, the European Union finalized the enlargement process. The Treaty of Nice, signed in 2001, introduced further institutional reform essential for accommodating a significantly larger membership in view of the fifth enlargement.⁴²⁴ The culmination of this process occurred on May 1, 2004, when the Union officially expanded to twenty-five member states, completing the fifth enlargement process.⁴²⁵

⁴¹⁸ Gligorov, V. (2012). Deepening and widening the Europe. <https://pescanik.net/deepening-and-widening-the-europe/>.

⁴¹⁹ European Parliament (1998). The PHARE Programme and the enlargement of the European Union. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/enlargement/briefings/33a1_en.htm. European Parliament (2012). Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)/Treaty of Maastricht. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/maastricht-treaty>.

⁴²⁰ European Commission (1998). Agenda 2000: the legislative proposals. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_98_258.

⁴²¹ European Parliament (1997). Treaty of Amsterdam. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/treaty-of-amsterdam>.

⁴²² O'Brennan, J. (2006). The Eastern Enlargement of the European Union. p. 107.

⁴²³ Ibid. p. 36.

⁴²⁴ European Parliament (2001). Treaty of Nice. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/treaty-of-nice#:~:text=The%20aim%20of%20the%20Treaty,well%20as%20Cyprus%20and%20Malta>.

⁴²⁵ European Commission (2025). EU Enlargement. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-enlargement_en.

The third chapter analyzed the perspective of the Russian Federation on the fifth enlargement and its foreign policy during the 1990s and early 2000s. Initially, Russia largely supported the European Union's initiatives in developing trade and fostering economic cooperation. However, following NATO's intervention in Serbia, the wars in Chechnya, and the election of Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin marked a significant shift in its foreign policy toward a more confrontational stance against Western countries.⁴²⁶ In the early 2000s, in parallel to the extension of the Union's influence into the post-Soviet space, Moscow perceived this development as a geopolitical threat, increasing tensions with Brussels. Nonetheless, despite these underlying frictions, the parties sought to maintain a degree of strategic cooperation as demonstrated by the initiative of the "four common spaces," in May 2003, strengthening their collaboration in the areas of economy, freedom, security, and justice, external security, and research and education.⁴²⁷ Moreover, following the fifth enlargement, the Union's "business as usual" stance towards Russia proved inadequate in responding to Russia's assertive behavior. This issue was evident during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in late 2004 and the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008.⁴²⁸ In both instances, the Union appeared divided and hesitant, projecting an image of political fragmentation that contributed to instability in the post-Soviet space.

Finally, the last chapter explored the strengths and weaknesses of the fifth enlargement, while also considering prospects. One of the main achievements of the European institutions has been their ability to integrate new member states while upholding compliance with the *acquis communautaire* and enhancing institutional efficiency. This reflects the Union's unique capacity to pursue both "deepening" and "widening" simultaneously.⁴²⁹ However, the fifth enlargement also underscored the need for a more prudent approach toward candidate countries that fail to uphold their core

⁴²⁶ AP News (2024). Putin's timeline of Russia's presidency and inauguration. <https://apnews.com/article/putin-russia-president-inauguration-timeline-413e4d80b14c7b4113f1abe576e4a5c2>.

⁴²⁷ European Commission (2003). Wider Europe — Neighbourhood: Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament. <https://aei.pitt.edu/38141/>.

⁴²⁸ Kuzio, T. (2005). Ukraine's 2004 Presidential Election: The Orange Revolution. Columbia University. https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/et/et_v12n4/et_v12n4_003.pdf. Svante, E. C. & al. (2008). Russia's War in Georgia: Causes and Implications for Georgia and the War. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute Silk Road Studies Program. https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/2008_08_PP_CornellPopjanevskiNillson_Russia-Georgia.pdf.

⁴²⁹ Ott, A. (2025). 20 years of the EU's big bang enlargement: From the return to Europe to the escape from Europe? *Maastricht Journal of European and Comparative Law*, Volume 31, Issue 5. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1023263X251318611>.

democratic principles, outlined in the Copenhagen criteria. In any case, it is crucial to distinguish between the enlargement process and the Union's external relations. Countries like the Russian Federation, which never held the candidate status, were not bound to respect the core principles of the Union. Therefore, the Union cannot directly influence the internal policies of the countries in its neighborhood.

To effectively prepare for future enlargement processes, the European Union must assess the impact of the fifth enlargement. Beginning in the late 1990s, the Union progressively developed more federal characteristics, with the introduction of European citizenship, the creation of the role of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and the establishment of a single currency. The fifth enlargement compelled the institutions to evolve and pursue greater efficiency to manage an expanded membership and sustain the process of deepening integration. In parallel, while preparing for a new phase of eastward enlargement, European institutions must consider the growing tension with Russia.

Consequently, while advancing its Eastern Europe agenda, the Union must develop a realistic and coherent strategy toward neighboring authoritarian states, including Russia. The experience of the last decades has shown that economic and political engagement with non-democratic regimes should be balanced with respect for the Union's democratic values, such as human rights and the respect for the rule of law. For future developments, the Union should seek to build cooperation on areas of mutual interest with Russia while maintaining a strong commitment to its core values. In this regard, a closer cooperation with Moscow should be guided by a framework of strategic coexistence and selective cooperation, without legitimizing the authoritarian regime.

With a broader understanding of the evolution that led to the process of the fifth enlargement, it is also possible to envision the trajectory of future accessions, guided by the continued application of the principles of deepening and widening. As of December 2024, the countries officially recognized as candidates for membership are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine, all located in Eastern Europe. As was the case in the fifth enlargement, the European Institutions will likely need to adapt further to accommodate these new members. Consequently, this may involve amending existing legal provisions within the

Union's founding treaties or even convening an intergovernmental conference to establish a new treaty framework.

At the same time, candidate countries are engaged in negotiations with the European Commission to advance their accession to the Union. Once these countries comply with the necessary conditions required, primarily the Copenhagen criteria, then they may be deemed eligible to become new member states. Predicting the timing and structure of the eighth enlargement remains challenging. However, drawing parallels with the fifth enlargement, the process will likely unfold in multiple phases, extending membership initially only to those countries most advanced in negotiations, with Montenegro currently being the frontrunner.⁴³⁰ In any case, the accession process is expected to be lengthy for all candidate countries. It is plausible that no new member state will join the Union before 2029, the final year of the second Von der Leyen Commission.

In conclusion, the fifth enlargement represented a historic turning point for the European continent, symbolizing both a rapprochement between East and West after the Cold War. The primary aim of this thesis was to analyze the history and implications of this process. The research also shed light on the evolving relationship between the European Union and the Russian Federation from the early 1990s onward, observing the geopolitical consequences of the Union's expansion into the post-Soviet space. Looking ahead, future enlargements will require European institutions and member states to demonstrate a renewed capacity for adaptation, as enlargement is not merely a technical process, but rather a profoundly political act with strategic implications. Indeed, the Union must consider the broader geopolitical implications of this process, especially in relation to its growing tensions with the Russian Federation. While progressively expanding in Eastern Europe, the Union shall re-engage with the Kremlin, remaining firmly committed to its core democratic principles, as the success of future enlargements will depend on the Union's ability to expand strategically.

Further research could focus on a comparative analysis between the fifth enlargement process and the current accession processes underway in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, greater attention should be devoted to the role of European conditionality as a driver of democratic consolidation in candidate countries, especially

⁴³⁰ European Economic and Social Committee (2024). The EU-Montenegro Joint Consultative Committee: Montenegro is advancing in the EU accession path. <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/press-releases/eu-montenegro-joint-consultative-committee-montenegro-advancing-eu-accession-path>.

considering recent cases of democratic backsliding across Europe. Research should also explore the controversial relationships between certain Union members' states and the Russian Federation, despite the sanctions regime imposed by the Union, followed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Finally, as the European Union prepares to enter a new wave of enlargement, reflecting on the impact of the fifth enlargement becomes essential for preparing future policy choices.

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