



13th International Stakeholder Conference PA9 of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region “Towards Innovative, Resilient and Inclusive Danube Region Through Unity and Cooperation”

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EUSDR – 12 May 2025



Panel discussion 1:
Education and labour
market policies in the
context of EU accession of
the Danube region
candidate countries

- ***WHO CAN APPLY? CONDITIONS FOR EU MEMBERSHIP:***
- **COPENHAGEN CRITERIA (1993):**
 - Political
 - Stable democratic institutions
 - Human rights, protection of minorities
 - Rule of law
 - Economic
 - Functioning market economy
 - Capacity to cope with competitive forces in EU
 - Ability to take on obligations of membership



1 Country submits an application to the Council (EU Member States).



2 Commission submits an Opinion on the application.



3 EU Member decide unanim to grant the co candidate stati



4 After conditions are met, the accession negotiations are opened with the agreement of all Member States.



5 Commission proposes a draft negotiating framework as a basis for the talks. Accession negotiations formally start once Member States agree on the negotiating framework.



6 During negc which are struc according to cl chapters, the c prepares to im laws and stanc Member States that all require met in each ca



7 Once negotiations on all areas are finalised, Commission gives its Opinion on the readiness of the country to become a Member State.



8 Based on this Opinion, EU Member States decide unanimously to close the negotiation process. The European Parliament must also give its consent.



9 All EU Mem States and the candidate cour and ratify an A Treaty which e the country to an EU Member

Steps toward joining

Clusters of negotiating chapters

Following the introduction of the [revised methodology for the accession negotiations](#) in February 2020, negotiating chapters are now divided in **six thematic clusters**:

- 1 Fundamentals
- 2 Internal market
- 3 Competitiveness & inclusive growth
- 4 Green agenda & sustainable connectivity
- 5 Resources, agriculture & cohesion
- 6 External relations



Negotiations on each cluster **open as a whole** – after the country fulfils the opening benchmarks. Each chapter will be dealt with individually with respect to its provisional closure. Negotiations on the **fundamentals open first and close last**; progress under the fundamentals' cluster will determine the overall pace of negotiations. If there is sufficient progress on reform priorities, this should lead to closer integration with the European Union, through accelerated integration and increased investments and funding.

The **screening** exercise consists of two phases:

The explanatory session: where the European Commission services explain chapter by chapter what the EU acquis is about, in terms of legislative alignment and adequate administrative capacity

The bilateral session: where the candidate country is invited to present where it stands, per each chapter, in its preparations to adopt and implement the EU acquis.

SOME SOCIAL PRIORITIES OF THE 2024-2029 COMMISSION

- ‘The **‘European social model’** will remain at the heart of future EU policies, contributing to a sustainable, fair and inclusive growth’ - the mission letter for Executive Vice-President **Roxana Mînzatu** (responsible for Quality Jobs, Social Rights, Education and Skills, and Preparedness),
- Embarking on a critical new phase for the European Union—one that **places social equity at the very heart of our agenda**. Delivering **tangible outcomes** to improve lives, advance social justice, and strengthen societal cohesion.
- **Key actions** the Commission will be delivering on:
 - A New **Action Plan in 2025** on the Implementation of the **EPSR**, which remains our ‘compass’;
 - Advance the work on **social justice**, in particular through the first-ever **EU Anti-Poverty Strategy** and the development of a **European Affordable Housing Plan**.
- In the employment areas, a **Quality Jobs Roadmap**. It aims to secure decent work, fair wages, and adequate social protections, ensuring that no one is left behind in the face of profound economic transformations.
- Finally, strengthening social dialogue remains at the heart of our approach to labour market reforms - a **new Pact for European Social Dialogue on 5 March 2025**.
- **The European Anti-Poverty Strategy** plans a comprehensive strategy to address the root causes of poverty, considering social contexts, age, gender, and geography. With a focus on symptoms like **in-work poverty**, energy poverty, transport poverty, lack of access to basic services, and housing issues.

Enlargement package and reports

Enlargement reports 2024: Commission outlines progress and priorities for candidate countries - European Commission



A detailed **assessment of the state of play and the progress made by the countries seeking to join the European Union.**

The reports provide guidance on key reform priorities for each enlargement country

The reports cover:

- Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia
- Ukraine
- Moldova
- Türkiye
- Georgia

EU Enlargement Package 2024

- Adopted every year by the Commission
- A set of documents explaining its policy on EU enlargement.
- The core - a Communication on enlargement
- Takes stock of the developments over the last year.
- Examines the progress made by the candidate countries and potential candidates,
- The challenges encountered and reforms to be addressed
- Sets out proposals for the way forward.
- Country reports
- EU enlargement is one of the top horizontal priorities under the current Commission's mandate and remains very high on the EU agenda and (see European Council Conclusions 19/12/2024)
- To support countries on their accession path, the Commission has launched:
 - **Growth Plan for the Western Balkans**
 - **Growth Plan for Moldova,**
 - **Dedicated Facility for Ukraine,**
- All these instruments combine financial support with conditionalities for disbursement linked to reforms.



Labour market in the enlargement package

Structural issues in the labour market, such as the wide gender gap, a skills mismatch and a high share of undeclared work continue to represent common challenges affecting the business environment, the workforce, and the overall growth of the 10 economies. Strengthening social dialogue, including the capacities of social partners, continues to be relevant in order to address these challenges.

Economic convergence needs to go hand in hand with social convergence – based on the principles of the EU Pillar on Social Rights and the EU social acquis. To achieve this, it is crucial that all enlargement countries **develop well-functioning labour market structures and institutions, effective social protection systems and strong social dialogue.**

Social dialogue in the enlargement package

In the Western Balkans: the report recommended to strengthen bipartite and tripartite social dialogue and investments in upskilling and reskilling to address structural mismatches in skills.

In Ukraine: the report mentions that strengthening of social dialogue will be paramount to rebuild a functioning labour market and address the skills shortage once the war ends. In this regard, capacity building for social partners, will be crucial.



Relevant acquis chapters

- Chapter 2: Free movement of workers
- Chapter 3: Right of Establishment and Freedom to Provide Services
- Chapter 19: Social policy and employment
- Chapter 26: Vocational education, adult education
- Other chapters with links (e.g. Ch 14, 18, 22, 23)



A Union of Skills to equip people for a competitive Europe

The Union of Skills will support the development of our Union's human capital to strengthen EU competitiveness. A key initiative of the first 100 days of this Commission, the Union of Skills will:

- **Deliver higher levels of basic skills**, for example through the Basic Skills Support Scheme pilot;
- **Provide lifelong opportunities for adults to regularly upskill and reskill**, for example through a Skills Guarantee pilot;
- **Facilitate recruitment by businesses across the EU**, for example through a Skills Portability Initiative;
- **Attract and retain the skills and talents** needed in the European economy, for example through the 'Choose Europe' action to attract top talent globally;
- **Have a strong governance foundation**, building on the new European Skills High-Level Board that will be informed by a European Skills Intelligence Observatory.
- **Has an external dimension**

A Pact for European Social Dialogue 2025

- ✓ Aims to strengthen the role of social partners in shaping labour markets, employment, and social policies
- ✓ establishes a long-term framework with concrete actions to be taken by the Commission and social partners to strengthen, expand the scope of social dialogue, and promote a stronger consultation of social partners.



Progress of enlargement reforms

- **Moldova**

- **Chapter 19** – has some level of preparation

- Measures were taken in the previous year to increase employment and to strengthen cooperation between social assistance authorities and employment authorities. In the coming year, Moldova should:
 - → further implement the measures set out in the concept paper on reforming the National Employment Agency to ensure adequate capacity;
 - → take concrete steps to strengthen the mandate and administrative and institutional capacity of the State Labour Inspectorate in line with ILO standards;
 - → continue the reform of social assistance, including its digitalisation.

- **Chapter 26** – between having some level of preparation and a moderate level of preparation

- Good progress was made during the reporting period.
- The Commission's recommendations from last year were largely implemented. In the coming year, Moldova should, in particular:
 - → start reforms to consolidate the quality and efficiency of the school network in both general and vocational education, building upon the 'model schools' pilot launched in the 2023/2024 academic year;
 - → advance the reform of the continuous professional development of teachers and school leaders, which was initiated when the National Institute for Educational Leadership was set up in 2023;

Progress of enlargement reforms

- Montenegro:

- Montenegro has been in accession negotiations with the EU since June 2012. As of 2025, all 33 screened chapters have been opened, with three provisionally closed. The EU has encouraged Montenegro to intensify efforts on fundamental reforms, particularly concerning rule of law, public administration, and alignment with the EU acquis in employment, social affairs, and education.
- **Chapter 2** (Free movement of workers) – Bilateral screening completed. Montenegro participates in EURES cooperation. Foreseen closure by Q2 2026
- **Chapter 19** (Social Policy and Employment) – Opened in December 2013; progress is ongoing but slow. Foreseen closure by Q4 2026 - has a moderate level of preparation. Progress was noted in employment policies and health and safety at work, but challenges remain in labour inspection effectiveness, social dialogue, and equal opportunities. Recommendations for 2025 include:
 - Strengthen the labour inspectorate's capacities and tools, particularly regarding undeclared work and occupational safety;
 - Improve the coverage and targeting of active labour market policies (ALMPs);
- **Chapter 26** (Education and Culture) – Provisionally closed in 2013.

Progress of enlargement reforms

- Bosnia and Herzegovina:
- **Chapter 19:** has **some level of preparation** in the area of social policy and employment.
- The Commission's recommendations from the previous year were only partially implemented and therefore remain valid. In the coming year, Bosnia and Herzegovina should in particular:
 - develop and adopt a countrywide employment strategy as a policy framework, while putting in place additional capacity for implementation and monitoring;
 - finalise and adopt the Youth Guarantee implementation plan in line with the EU model and guidance, and prepare for the piloting to start in 2026;
 - introduce a uniform minimum level of maternity leave benefits and protection throughout the country, starting by harmonising the definitions of maternity, paternity and parental leave.
- **Chapter 26:** There continued to be limited effort in supporting the **digital transformation of education and training**, including on digital skills without a countrywide coordinated approach.
 - A countrywide policy document on **vocational education and training** (VET) has been in place since 2021, based on the Riga conclusions. However, no noticeable progress followed.

Progress of enlargement reforms

- Ukraine:
- Chapter 19
- The country remains at an **early stage of preparation** in the field of social policy and employment and limited progress has taken place. The Commission's recommendations from last year were only partially met and remain valid. In the coming year Ukraine should in particular:
 - adopt new framework legislation for labour relations and occupational safety and health in line with the EU acquis, ensure an enabling environment for bipartite and tripartite social dialogue, and strengthen the capacities of social partners;
 - adopt the strategy for de-institutionalisation of alternative care for children in line with Ukraine Plan commitments and ensure implementation of the related reforms;
 - continue to reform the social benefit system and put in place a system for procuring social services in line with the Ukraine Plan commitments, so as to improve their targeting, adequacy and sustainability.

Chapter 26:

- Ukraine has **some level of preparation** in education and culture. Some progress was made, including with measures on education and training statistics, improvements to the network of education institutions, approval of a strategic plan on education reforms, adoption of a National Strategy for the Development of Inclusive Education for 2024-2029 and its corresponding action plan for 2024-2026, as well as adoption of the law on preschool education. The Commission's recommendations from last year were, therefore, well implemented. In the coming year, Ukraine should, in particular:
 - → ensure that legislation on preschool education is implemented;
 - → ensure that legislation on vocational education is adopted and enters into force;
 - → ensure that the Strategy for the Development of Ukrainian Culture is adopted.

Progress of enlargement reforms

- **Serbia:**
- **Chapter 19 moderately prepared** in the area of social policy and employment. Serbia made limited progress.
 - The Commission's recommendations were partially met and remain valid. In the coming period,
- Serbia should in particular:
 - conduct a functional review of active labour market policies and the workload of national employment service advisers to ensure adequate financial and institutional resources for employment and social policies and target more systematically young people, women and long-term unemployed people, and continue implementing the Youth Guarantee pilot;
 - launch consultations on the new labour law, including provisions on foreign seconded workers in line with the EU acquis, and avoid further delays in implementing the action plan for Chapter 19;
 - improve the coverage and adequacy of social benefits for people below the poverty threshold, including financial social assistance and child allowances, address the high caseload of social welfare centres, and remove the administrative burden when applying for social assistance, in particular for the Roma population.
- **Chapter 26**
 - a **good level of preparation** in education and culture.
 - The Commission's recommendations from last year were partially implemented and remain largely valid. In the coming year, Serbia should in particular:
 - increase the number of children participating in early childhood education and care, in particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds;
 - continue with the operationalisation of the NQF system, focusing more on the quality and scope of non-formal education and higher education;
 - ensure that the policy and institutional framework for quality assurance in higher education fully complies with the ENQA recommendations.

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Challenges

Enlargement Package 2024:

- Administrative capacity at all levels
- Social Dialogue at all levels

Other aspects:

- Overview of legislative alignment achieved so far for Chapters 2, 19
- National Programme for Alignment with the EU Acquis (NPAA)
- Soft law convergence
- Reform Agendas
- Missions for mutual understanding/in-depth discussions

Thank you



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