



## Report of mid-term conference in Brussels

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## Executive summary

The InvigoratEU Mid-Term Conference held on 13 May 2025 brought together policymakers, academics, civil society experts, and EU officials to assess the growing challenges and opportunities in EU enlargement policy. Across multiple high-level panels, the conference explored topics of democratic resilience, critical infrastructure, social cohesion, and the security and defence dimension of European resilience. Some of the key takeaways of the discussions were the following:

**1. Security and democracy must be treated as mutually reinforcing.** A core message from the conference was that the EU can no longer treat security and democracy as two separate agendas or assume one can be “paused” for the sake of the other. Speakers underlined the case of Ukraine and the importance of EU’s continued support with democratic reforms even with the full-scale war underway, supporting the argument that democracy is both a guarantor and a result of security.

**2. Flexible, differentiated integration should become a cornerstone of enlargement.** Many interventions pointed to the limits of the old “all-or-nothing” approach to EU membership. The debate suggested that the EU needs more flexible forms of integration that remain merit based. For instance, frontrunner candidate countries can be more tangibly rewarded through differentiated integration, without lowering EU standards.

**3. Hybrid threats and critical infrastructure require more comprehensive collaboration, where enlargement can serve as a resilience booster.** Hybrid threats and critical infrastructure are shared concerns for both Member States and candidate countries. While candidate countries have historically been more exposed to the cyberattacks, energy coercion, and other forms of pressure, they bring valuable experience in countering these threats. Therefore, they can act as resilience multipliers; the accession process would facilitate provision of cross-border coordination and a framework for mutually beneficial shared standards.

**4. Social cohesion is an essential element for the long-term success of EU enlargement.** Speakers discussed how regional gaps, weak institutions, corruption, youth unemployment, and high emigration can feed frustration among people in candidate countries and create fertile ground for polarisation. Therefore, this dimension, although more challenging to measure, cannot remain unaddressed by the EU.

**5. The EU must invest in strategic, value-based communication to counter disinformation and internal polarisation.** Disinformation, foreign interference, and conspiracy-driven narratives surfaced across all panels as cross-cutting challenges that undermine both security and democracy in the neighbourhood. Moldova’s experience of persistent hybrid pressure, including disinformation and illicit financing, and Georgia’s “Deep State” rhetoric show how malign narratives can be weaponised to erode trust in the EU.

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## About InvigoratEU

InvigoratEU is a Horizon Europe-funded project, coordinated by the EU-Chair at the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) together with the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) in Berlin. The project, with a duration of 3 years from January 2024 until December 2026, examines how the EU can structure its future relations with its Eastern neighbours and the countries of the Western Balkans. The consortium has received around three million euros for this endeavour.

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About the project: [www.invigorat.eu](http://www.invigorat.eu)

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## Introduction

The InvigoratEU Mid-Term Conference examined ways to consolidate and steer the renewed momentum in EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy that has emerged since 2022. Amidst new geopolitical challenges, democratic erosion, and societal fragmentation, the mid-term conference brought together 85 participants, including 51 members of the InvigoratEU consortium, representatives from all three sister projects (REUNIR, ReEngage, GeoPowerEU), as well as stakeholders from EU institutions, Brussels-based think tanks and civil society organisations. The public conference convened a day after the dedicated workshop, which gathered project consortium members on the development of resilience toolkits.



The topics discussed on 12 May 2025 effectively set the stage for the further debates that continued in the public conference the following day. In her opening remarks, InvigoratEU Scientific Lead **Funda Tekin** (Institut für Europäische Politik) underlined the importance of the mid-term conference as a milestone of the first phase. In this regard, she outlined the core themes emerging from the research: the growing relevance of security (state and societal) and the importance of building joint, not parallel, resilience between the EU and the candidate countries. She pointed to the project's conceptual backbone: the dual logic of enlargement (modernisation and geopolitical), the three Rs (Reform, Response, Rebuild) approach, and an all-encompassing understanding of resilience that bridges top-down institutional action with bottom-up societal engagement. In closing, she stressed that the path forward for EU integration should be flexible without eroding the legitimacy and trust that underpin the enlargement process itself.



## Panel 1: The security, defence and partnership dimension of European resilience: Overcoming the expectation-capability gap

Moderated by **Nicoletta Pirozzi** (Istituto Affari Internazionali), the first panel examined the capabilities of the EU to be a credible security and defence actor in its neighbourhood at a time when it faces a direct threat from Russia, and a second Trump administration that has given the EU a new awareness for its security.

**Cosmin Dobran** (European External Action Service) opened the discussion with addressing three main points: First he pointed out that the logic of the EU enlargement has shifted to a more security and defence focus that had been subsumed under other considerations up until 2022.

Second, he emphasised that the EU already possesses a solid foundation of cooperation in the field of security with its Eastern neighbourhood. Contrary to some assumptions, this engagement is not new but has been developing over years through various initiatives.

Third, Mr Dobran underlined a critical yet often overlooked dimension: while much attention is paid to the support the EU provides *to* candidate countries, far less is said about the strategic value that these countries *bring to* the EU itself. Recognising this reciprocity, he called for greater appreciation of the candidates' contributions to European security.

On the question of how the EU can further strengthen security in its neighbourhood, Mr Dobran argued that the key lies in consolidating the political will of the 27 Member States. By doing so, the EU can mobilise a much stronger and more coherent response than what is possible through bilateral efforts.



He also pointed to the existing suite of EU instruments, such as the Security and Defence Partnerships, the civilian Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations, and peacekeeping initiatives – as important foundations.



**Tyyne Karjalainen** (Finnish Institute of International Affairs) presented the findings of her research on EU security cooperation with Ukraine. Her core question addressed the issue why the EU had not provided more substantial support to Ukraine prior to 2022, and why the assistance remained limited during the full-scale war.

Ms Karjalainen argued that the reasons of this constraint can be traced back to the early 1990s. At that time, Ukraine's independence was accompanied by denuclearisation, yet it received minimal support in developing national defence capabilities.

She pinpointed four principal explanations for this phenomenon:

1. The EU's strategic logic prioritised relations with Russia, viewing Ukraine through a centre-periphery lens that relegated it to secondary status.
2. The EU's civilian and normative identity framed military support to conflict zones as a political taboo.
3. The EU security agenda remained preoccupied with migration, terrorism, and the southern neighbourhood, sidelining Eastern European defence priorities.
4. Internal divisions on the EU's role in security and persistent distrust of Ukraine's Soviet-era military legacy further constrained cooperation.

Ms Karjalainen highlighted a significant transformation in these attitudes post Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022: the EU cut ties with Moscow, assumed a more active military role, redirected its security focus toward Eastern Europe, and began to perceive Ukraine as a credible partner. Nonetheless, she cautioned that the structural factors, which hindered past engagement continue and may resurface in future, potentially limiting the EU's long-term commitment.

**Artur Gruszczak** (Jagiellonian University) addressed the EU's preparedness for hybrid threats in its neighbourhood. While he emphasised political will as an essential factor, he also pointed to substantial structural limitations, notably the fact that national security remains under the sole responsibility of Member States, as stipulated in Article 4(2) of the Treaty on European Union.

He outlined that since the mid-2010s and particularly after the 2016 NATO-Warsaw summit, the EU has developed tools for hybrid threat mitigation (including political interference, disinformation, subversion etc.). Among these are mechanisms that raise awareness, improve strategic communication, and strengthen crisis management capacities, notably through platforms such as the EU's Integrated Political Crisis Response (IPCR) mechanism. However, most tools are effective within EU borders, and their applicability to neighbouring countries such as Moldova or Montenegro remains limited.

In conclusion, Mr Gruszczak stressed that while the EU is by no means powerless in the face of hybrid threats, it is important to acknowledge the broader spectrum of challenges. Russia is not the *only* actor contesting European security; other revisionist powers, including non-state actors are increasingly active and capable in this domain.

**Oleksiy Melnyk** (Razumkov Centre) emphasised that Ukraine should no longer be viewed solely as a recipient of European security assistance, but increasingly as a contributor to the defence of the European continent. Drawing on a military proverb: *no plan survives first contact with the enemy*, he underlined that while plans may fail by unforeseen circumstances, proper preparation ensures adaptability. This, he argued, was a lesson overlooked by Russia, which gravely misjudged its own readiness ahead of the 2022 invasion.

Mr Melnyk identified three main capability gaps in the EU's approach:

1. **Time**, noting that Europe effectively lost a decade as Ukraine faced escalating threats by Russia;
2. **Will** or a lack of, for a decisive, swift action;
3. **Vision** that is grounded in realistic assessment of threats, available capacities and identification of the resources needed.

He urged the EU to take proportional, threat-based approach, identifying Russia as the primary military threat. Reflecting on the past, he addressed missed opportunities, particularly in 2014, to provide Ukraine with decisive military aid, and called for greater political clarity and will to eliminate the threat of Russian aggression. Finally, Melnyk warned against

preparing only for the wars we anticipate, reminding policymakers that future conflicts will almost certainly defy expectations.

## Panel 2: Strengthening democracy in fragile EU neighbourhood contexts

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The moderator **Tinatin Akhvediani** (Centre for European Policy Studies – CEPS; Assistant Coordinator and WP leader of InvigoratEU sister project – REUNIR) the current state of democracy in the three candidate countries: Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia; review the EU's actions and identify future perspectives.

**Elena Ventura** (Carnegie Europe) began by introducing the status of the progress made in Ukraine in this regard. She acknowledged the “turbo mode” of pro-European reforms adopted by Ukrainian government since February 2022, including restructuring judicial and anti-corruption mechanisms with the latter being the main hindrance point of Ukraine in its path to democratic consolidation.

Ms Ventura outlined two main insights into how the EU can further support Ukraine moving forward:

First, she stressed the importance of approaching security and democracy as interdependent, rather than separate tracks. While the EU has largely prioritised security assistance, there is a risk that sometimes this comes at the expense of sustained democratic reform. In this regard, she pointed out that the EU support will become even more crucial in light of diminished US assistance.

Second, she addressed the political dimension of reconstruction, with particular attention to the growing public trust in Ukraine's military and veterans. Polls indicate that trust in the military now exceeds trust in parliament, and there is growing readiness among the population to support political parties led by veterans. In this context, Ms Ventura emphasised the importance of investing in veteran reintegration and civic training, so that returning soldiers are empowered as citizens rather than politically instrumentalised in the post-war period.

Lastly, she concluded by reiterating that the EU should keep supporting Ukraine, while keeping in mind that the process cannot follow pre-war timelines or assumptions. At the same time, she cautioned against lowering reform standards solely for the sake of enlargement, as this would be a disservice to the citizens who support democratic reforms.

**Ambassador Daniela Morari** (Head of the Mission of the Republic of Moldova to the European Union) framed Moldova's current trajectory as a four-lane highway—each lane representing a key dimension of the country's European path. The challenge, she noted, is not only to move forward, but to do so at maximum speed across all lanes without compromising on any of them.



First dimension is **accession**. Moldova is advancing with bilateral screening underway and progress across negotiation clusters. The goal for 2025 is to provide as many deliverables as possible and open more clusters, especially in the context of the upcoming elections.

Second dimension concerns **accelerated integration**. Beyond the formal enlargement process, Moldova is actively participating in EU programmes across sectors such as customs, digital transformation, and healthcare. Drawing on lessons from the Western Balkans, institutions are being encouraged to engage with as many EU mechanisms as possible to deliver visible benefits for citizens.

Third dimension is a **growth plan**. Ambassador Morari welcomed the European Commission's proposal for the largest financial assistance package Moldova has received since its independence.

Fourth dimension is **resilience and security**: Ambassador Morari described how Moldova continues to face a broad spectrum of hybrid threats—ranging from disinformation and illicit financing to energy manipulation and kinetic incidents. She underscored that foreign interference is persistent, adaptive, and long-term, and that building resilience must be equally sustainable. Moldova is working to reinforce institutional capacity, adapt legislation to respond more rapidly, and engage with civil society—but strong political messaging from the EU and its Member States remains essential in showcasing long-term support.

**Levan Kakhishvili** (ETH Zürich) offered the assessment of Georgia's current trajectory. While Moldova and Ukraine are working under extraordinary constraints to deliver on democratic expectations, Georgia is moving in reverse. Repressive laws, intimidation of protestors, efforts to block foreign funding to civil society are being used as a part of an intentional shift to autocracy.

He argued that although EU conditionality has been present, it has mostly focused on improving institutional effectiveness, largely overlooking whether those institutions were being used to uphold or erode democracy. This blind spot has allowed the Georgian Dream, to consolidate power by capturing all the key institutions, including the electoral system. Such institutional control has prevented genuine political change, and the people have been unable to express their will.

Mr Kakhishvili also underlined how the Georgian Dream is making itself immune to the external pressure for democratisation by reframing and reconstructing discourses: they exploit polarisation in the society and spread conspiracy driven-narratives, such as Global War Party or Deep State, controlling the Western world, which are used to erode public trust in the EU.

He stressed that the Georgian case should be seen as a warning for EU policy: without stronger mechanisms to uphold democratic integrity, enlargement tools risk becoming procedural rather than protective. He concluded by underlining the importance of distinguishing between the government and the public. Despite recent setbacks, large segments of Georgian society continue to express strong support for EU integration—and this distinction must inform the EU's future engagement.

**Marie-Sophie Peyre** (DG ENEST – European Commission) began by emphasising that the EU enlargement is one of the priorities for the new Commission, with a number of Directorates-General expected to integrate enlargement into their operational agendas. She underlined the EU's evolving approach to promoting democracy, noting that while traditionally used tools remain crucial, the EU is expanding its toolkit, notably through the coming European Union Democracy shield, which is meant as the high-level response to this major shift through the link between democratic resilience and security.

Among the new instruments, Ms Peyre also pointed to the European Democracy Action Plan and the Defence of Democracy Package, both aimed at strengthening electoral transparency, media freedom, and civic participation. She also noted a new requirement in the accession process: candidate countries must develop roadmaps for democratic reforms, which are monitored regularly.

Additionally, Ms Peyre highlighted the increasing challenges posed by disinformation and foreign interference, which undermine both the election integrity and broader democratic stability.

On a country-specific level, she mentioned the difficulties in Georgia and reiterated that the EU supports the aspirations of Georgian people. While the GD remains as the main interlocutor, it is clear that the integration process is frozen. She mentioned the progress of Moldova where the EU is supporting the upcoming electoral integrity by helping to limit external interference. On Ukraine, recognising the constraints of martial law, she noted that the EU is closely monitoring the domestic discourse around elections and is engaged in ongoing work to support democratic institutions under exceptionally difficult conditions.

**Pernille Rieker** (University of Oslo; coordinator of the InvigoratEU sister project – ReEngage), speaking as the panel's discussant, reflected on a key issue: whether the EU can still promote democracy in its neighbourhood, given that strategic competition, security, and stability are now front and centre in its foreign policy.

She acknowledged that democracy and security are increasingly intertwined but warned against turning democracy into just another tool of geopolitics. Ukraine's strides in fighting corruption were noted as encouraging, but she also flagged growing concerns about democratic backsliding across the region.

Ms Rieker questioned whether the EU's emphasis on institutional reforms might be missing the bigger picture—namely, the need to nurture a genuine democratic culture. Using Georgia as an example, she noted that while EU has helped improve institutional efficiency, it has not been enough to stop state capture or protect democratic standards. Moldova was another case in point: its push for rapid EU integration may help stabilise the country, but she cautioned that such momentum could sidestep essential political reforms unless grounded in democratic values.

She also highlighted Moldova's efforts to counter foreign interference as particularly relevant, suggesting that the EU could learn from these experiences. While she welcomed initiatives like the European Democracy Action Plan and the Defence of Democracy Package,



she questioned whether these tools are robust or mature enough to deal with deep-rooted democratic decline.



### Panel 3: Enhancing social cohesion and economic convergence in the EU neighbourhood

Moderated by **Nino Abzianidze** (Georgian Institute of Public Affairs), the third panel explored the multi-layered relationship between the EU accession process and the promotion of social cohesion in candidate countries. Ms Abzianidze opened the discussion by framing social cohesion as a broad, multi-dimensional concept that extends beyond socio-economic indicators. Under the InvigoratEU project the term includes social and political participation, belonging, and trust in institutions as core elements. She emphasised that social cohesion can be both horizontal (between citizens) and vertical (between citizens towards their governing institutions) with both objective and subjective components.

**Ivanka Lakova** (DG REGIO, European Commission) echoed this broader interpretation arguing that EU accession is about more than technical compliance. It involves fostering a societal fabric that supports good governance, inclusive institutions, and trust between citizens and the state. She noted the unique political and historical contexts of the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe compared to Western Europe, asserting that economic development is inseparable from political one and both are rooted in the strength of societal fabric.

On the issue of growing political polarisation in the region and the EU's role in mitigating it, Ms Lakova challenged the idea that polarisation is more intense in candidate countries



than elsewhere but warned of its depoliticising effect, which can lead citizens to disengage from democratic processes. She argued that the EU should use both formal and informal negotiation frameworks to encourage candidate states to see the bigger picture of what it means to be part of a European project.

To conclude, Ms Lakova noted that the EU should focus more on individuals, as they are the building blocks of the social fabric, even if they are more difficult to identify. For this reason, she highlighted the lack of longitudinal data to track perceptions over time. She encouraged academia to provide better data to track causality, establish trends and draw lessons on EU policies and to hold policymakers accountable.

**Frank Schimmelfennig** (ETH Zürich) noted that the social dimension of Europeanisation has been relatively understudied, as social and welfare policies remain primarily the domain of the national governments while the EU focuses mainly on regulation. He pointed to a persistent discrepancy between formal legislative alignment and practical implementation and highlighted several reasons for this gap: social policies are areas of low salience, which leads to limited attention to implementation. Much of the implementation depends on relations between non-state actors; in other words, there is a degree of informality, and social *acquis* can carry an economic cost, affecting candidate countries' competitiveness.

Turning to the issue of political polarization, Mr Schimmelfennig argued that the capacity to respond to it lies primarily with national governments, as the EU influence is limited in this area. He referred to Ivan Krastev's opinion that EU integration tends to benefit high-skilled individuals through mobility but create feelings of exclusion, especially among relatively low-skilled groups of society who do not benefit from the same advantages. This imbalance, he suggested, has contributed to growing domestic polarisation.

In conclusion, Mr Schimmelfennig reiterated the gap between law on paper and practice, calling for sustained EU support for domestic actors to ensure genuine compliance. He underlined that the EU should focus on long-term capacity building instead of "box-ticking" exercise.



Giorgi Khishtovani (Policy and Management Consulting Group) outlined five key dimensions of socio-economic equality in candidate countries:

1. Regional disparities with capital cities advancing more rapidly than rural areas;
2. Labour and education challenges, including high youth unemployment and low participation of female labour force;
3. Governance issues due to corruption and weak institutions that limit service delivery;
4. Migration with high emigration rates exacerbating demographic and economic imbalances;
5. The EU accession process itself, which acts as a catalyst for changes with the prospect of membership driving reforms and reducing inequalities.

He emphasised that although structural problems persist, accession to the EU offers a critical opportunity to address these deep-rooted divides.

With regard to growing political polarisation, Mr Khishtovani argued that the EU has placed too much emphasis on institutional and governance reforms, while giving insufficient attention to civil society engagement, political education and media independence. Therefore, he urged the EU to establish dialogue platforms with citizens, not just with state representatives. This would allow more grassroots participation and counteract the political polarisation strategies often deployed in autocratic regimes.

In a closing round, Mr Khishtovani stressed that EU policy should better reflect the human element of social cohesion, by placing greater weight on trust, participation and identity, rather than focusing solely on socio-economic indicators.

## Panel 4: Securing critical infrastructure and developing connectivity in the EU neighbourhood

Moderated by **Strahinja Subotić** (European Policy Centre – CEP) the panel opened by highlighting the importance of critical infrastructure (CI) which is often an overlooked topic of discussion.



**Ramūnas Vilpišauskas** (University of Vilnius) presented insights from an InvigoratEU [policy report](#) on critical infrastructure (CI) protection and resilience in a context of growing interdependence and polycrises. The report compares national approaches across the Baltic States, Finland, and three candidate countries—Montenegro, Georgia, and Ukraine—highlighting key divergences in how states define and safeguard critical infrastructure.

A central finding was that the scope of what counts as “critical” varies widely because of differing threat perceptions. Countries experiencing higher exposure to risk, such as Ukraine have adopted broader and more urgent approaches, particularly in physical infrastructure. In contrast, cybersecurity has seen more consistent development across all cases, reflecting the higher frequency of cyberattacks compared to kinetic threats.

Mr Vilpišauskas noted that energy and telecommunications companies are increasingly engaged in assessing what needs protection and how to secure it. However, high costs and



slow procurement processes complicate these efforts, creating trade-offs between security needs and financial or operational constraints.

In terms of governance, he emphasised the importance of cross-border cooperation and strong public-private coordination. He cautioned against overextending the CI designation to too many assets, warning that this can overwhelm companies with administrative obligations. Agility was also highlighted as crucial but difficult to operationalise.

Finally, Mr Vilpišauskas argued that the EU enlargement process can serve as a driver for improved coordination and resilience-building by forming shared standards through more regular engagement between Member States and candidate countries.

**Danijela Jaćimović** (University of Montenegro) opened her remarks with a quote from Kristalina Georgieva: *“A shock is an incredible opportunity – the impossible becomes possible.”* She echoed the sentiment, arguing that disruption, despite being painful, can act as a catalyst for meaningful reform.

She identified digitalisation as a central pillar of Montenegro’s development strategy, both for economic growth and for closing the gap with the EU. Nevertheless, she warned that the digital shift also exposes countries to new vulnerabilities. She referenced the 2022 cyberattack – attributed to Russian-linked actors and launched from Cuba – which paralysed Montenegro’s public systems in retaliation for its NATO membership. This incident, she said, served as a wake-up call and prompted a national push to strengthen cybersecurity alongside ongoing digital reforms.

She outlined Montenegro’s achievements with regards to information security and CI protection, noting that 17 sectors are now officially recognised under Montenegro’s CI framework. Yet, significant challenges include limited financial resources, lack of human capital, expertise gaps and fragmented coordination.

EU support, she stressed, remains crucial. Montenegro’s administration is committed to fulfilling its obligations, and external technical assistance—such as experts sent by Member States—plays a valuable role in capacity-building. She cited the recently published Barometer 2026, which projects that Montenegro could be ready to close all accession chapters by the end of 2026.

Turning to economic security, Ms Jaćimović raised the issue of foreign investment in critical sectors, referencing ongoing debates in Montenegro about investments from China and the UAE. Even though concerns over strategic dependency are growing, the European Commission has encouraged Montenegro to accept certain external investments. This, she argued, raises important questions about the long-term implications for CI.

**Juha Jokela** (Finnish Institute of International Affairs), acting as discussant, closed the session by reflecting on the key findings of the InvigoratEU policy report. He described the methodology, particularly the collection and analysis of concrete attack incidents as *“eye-opening”*.

He urged participants to widen their understanding of risk beyond hybrid threats, noting that resilience must also account for more conventional vulnerabilities. As an example, he cited the recent large-scale power outages in Spain and Portugal, underlining the economic and political costs of failing to invest in infrastructure protection.

Mr Jokela posed a question for reflection: Is the EU enlargement process responding adequately to the need for resilience-building in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans? He linked this to a broader question of whether resilience-based deterrence is sufficient, or whether the EU should move towards a model of deterrence by punishment in response to hostile acts.

This said, deterrence by punishment is not without risks. The motives behind hybrid operations are often opaque, making it difficult to determine the intended outcomes. Therefore, responding too quickly or too forcefully may inadvertently serve the attacker's interests, an outcome that must carefully be avoided.

## Conclusion

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To conclude, these discussions stressed further that enlargement should be understood as a central pillar of how the EU thinks about its own security, democracy, and resilience, instead of treating it as a purely technical process. The conference highlighted that future steps in EU enlargement must combine flexible, merit-based integration with a much stronger focus on protecting democratic institutions, safeguarding critical infrastructure, and addressing deep-rooted social and economic grievances in candidate countries. The debates also showed that candidate countries are not passive recipients of EU support but active partners, whose experience in dealing with hybrid threats, energy pressure, and disinformation can strengthen the Union as a whole. By bringing these insights together, the InvigoratEU Mid-Term Conference helped to visualise what a more resilient, inclusive, and credible enlargement policy could look like, and effectively set the agenda for the project's work in the second half of its implementation.





## Dissemination & communication

The InvigoratEU Mid-term Conference was promoted via TEPSA's social media accounts (LinkedIn, Twitter/X, Bluesky, Facebook, and Instagram) through a dedicated communications campaign and specifically designed visual identity. Regular reminders were posted to invite interested participants and stakeholders to register for this event.

An announcement of the Mid-term Conference, including the final agenda and pictures, was added to the [TEPSA website](#).

Overall, the conference was attended by 85 in-person participants. The event was also livestreamed on YouTube, with 268 people following online during the day. After the event, the recording was [edited into separate videos](#) for each panel, including the Q&A sessions.

Making these videos publicly available ensured the outcomes produced by the conference served as educational and policy-relevant resources long after the implementation period. Overall, as of 26 November, the videos gathered 7077 impressions and 223 views; these numbers are bound to increase as the videos remain accessible on TEPSA's YouTube channel.

Each panel discussion was highlighted in dedicated LinkedIn and Bluesky posts and accompanied by professional live photography. TEPSA's Instagram account provided highlights from the conference in the form of Instagram stories. Subsequently, a dedicated Instagram post was created, showcasing the main moments from the conference.

Additionally, the project's hashtag (#InvigoratEU) was used by TEPSA and consortium members in social media communications related to the conference. This approach proved effective for two main reasons. First, stakeholders who could not attend in person were still able to follow the discussions in real time, interact with the content, and share it within their own networks. Second, the mixture of short posts, visual material and a shared hashtag gave the project a clear and recognisable online presence, reinforcing InvigoratEU's identity across social media platforms.

## About InvigoratEU

InvigoratEU is a Horizon Europe-funded project, coordinated by the EU-Chair at the University of Duisburg-Essen (UDE) together with the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) in Berlin. The project, with a duration of 3 years from January 2024 until December 2026, examines how the EU can structure its future relations with its Eastern neighbours and the countries of the Western Balkans. The consortium has received around three million euros for this endeavour.

### How can the EU invigorate its enlargement and neighbourhood policy to enhance Europe's resilience?

Our **first goal** is to investigate how to reform the EU's enlargement strategy in a new geopolitical phase, HOW TO RESPOND to other actors' geopolitical ambitions in the Eastern Neighbourhood and Western Balkans, and HOW TO REBUILD the EU's foreign policy arsenal in view of a new era of military threats (triple "R" approach) combining the modernisation and geopolitical logics of EU enlargement, leading to new data – e.g. a public opinion survey in Ukraine, a set of scenarios, an external influence index (Russia, China, Turkey), and a social policy compliance and cohesion scoreboard.



Our **second goal** is to elaborate an evidence-based, forward-looking vision for the EU's political agenda and institutional frameworks for co-designing a multidimensional toolbox (i.e. two tailor-made toolkits), together with InvigoratEU's Expert Hub, Civil Society (CS) Network, Youth Labs, Workshops for Young Professionals and Policy Debates in a gaming set up, which will result in context-sensitive and actionable policy recommendations for European and national political stakeholders and (young) European citizens in particular.

Our **third goal** is to deploy a CDE (communication, dissemination and exploitation) strategy aiming at recommendations from Day 1 to maximize our scientific, policy and societal impact in invigorating the EU's enlargement and neighbourhood policies to enhance Europe's resilience. Ultimately, InvigoratEU is a deliberately large consortium respecting the diversity of Europe and political perspectives; 7 out of 18 are from Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and the western Balkans (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia), complemented by our Civil Society Network of 9 representatives from all Western Balkan countries, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

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