

CEPS POLICY BRIEF

IT'S TIME FOR SOME TOUGH DECISIONS ON EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY

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SUMMARY

The EU is entering a critical phase in the debate over how to prepare for its next enlargement. With the European Commission's forthcoming pre-enlargement policy review and the European Council's expected October 2026 discussion on enlargement, a growing number of Member States have put forward proposals to adapt the accession process, provide candidates with earlier integration benefits, and prepare the EU's institutions and policies for a larger Union.

This CEPS Policy Brief examines the main ideas currently under discussion, including both papers and 'non-papers', and their various implications. While these proposals differ in scope and ambition, they all recognise that the traditional accession process needs to evolve as the EU prepares for the next wave of enlargement.

Based on this analysis, three policy recommendations are put forward for how the EU can make the enlargement process more effective and credible, while still upholding the merit-based approach that underpins the accession process.

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INTRODUCTION

The European Council has signalled that its forthcoming October meeting will deliberate on enlargement policy in depth, following at the end of September the expected publication of the Commission's pre-enlargement policy review with long overdue proposals for adapting the EU's institutions for further enlargement. The early summer saw a plethora of no less than five 'non-papers[1]' from many Member States advocating various ideas, as well as one very official letter from Germany's Chancellor Merz about Ukraine addressed to the leadership in Brussels. Finally, there was also an unpublished Commission idea called 'reverse enlargement', where formal accession would come first, followed by the progressive application of the rights and obligations of membership. This was so comprehensively rejected by Member States that it won't be discussed any further here.

The debates underway reveal a wide-ranging set of distinct but complementary issues calling for solutions. One objective would be to accelerate the regular accession process for opening and closing the chapters and clusters. But since, in any case, it takes a decade or so for the candidate country to master the EU's *acquis* there are also ideas aiming at delivering partial benefits to the candidates alongside the way. These come under several overlapping headings – 'staged accession', 'gradual integration' and 'sectoral integration'. Contrasting with this increasingly complex system, there are opposing calls to simplify it.

Given the mixed experiences of recent enlargement rounds, there are also calls for better safeguards to ensure new Member States don't backslide from the EU's value system after acceding. Related to this is to make sure a candidate country ready to join the EU isn't blocked by a single Member State's veto, at any stage of the accession process, all the way through to the Treat of Accession's ratification. In short, there's widespread agreement that the EU itself must adapt its institutions and policies to meet an increased number of Member States.

Finally, the recent revival of the EU's enlargement agenda has been largely driven by the security threats stemming from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Given the

[1] The five non-papers, reviewed below, are: Non-Paper by France and Germany, '*A New Momentum for Enlargement*', 4 June 2026; Non-Paper, by Austria, Czech Republic, Italy, Slovakia, Slovenia, '*Towards systematic sectoral integration into the EU single market*', undated; Non-Paper by Germany, '*Ukraine as "Acceding Member State"',* April 2026; Non-paper by France, '*Towards an integrated state status – A more effective enlargement process through upscaled gradual integration'*, 26 March 2026; and Non-Paper by France, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, '*Towards a catalogue of options for future accession treaties',* June 2026. Additionally, Chancellor Merz has addressed the EU leadership to propose a special institutional status being extended to Ukraine before its formal accession.

geopolitical and security stakes involved, Ukraine (but also Moldova) require tailor-made strategic solutions.

All these together point towards at least an awareness of the case for a radical and comprehensive reform of the entire enlargement process. And decisions need to be made this year, before a degree of political paralysis potentially sets in due to elections in several key EU Member States in 2027, notably the French presidential election which might see the triumph of a candidate who is vehemently anti-enlargement.

This CEPS Policy Brief reviews existing ideas and proposals on addressing the bottlenecks in the enlargement process and puts forward key three policy recommendations on how to address them and how to keep momentum going.

IDEAS FOR ACCELERATING THE ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

ACCELERATING THE REGULAR ACCESSION PROCESS

Here, there are two ideas. The *first* is that all clusters could be opened for all candidates without delay (as outlined in the non-paper by France and Germany from June 2026). The *second* is that Council decisions on intermediate steps – and importantly on the opening and closing of chapters and clusters – should be subject to qualified majority voting (QMV), as advocated by European Council President Antonio Costa for Ukraine and Moldova, which has received cautious support from the Commission. There is strong support from think tanks that the latter idea should be expanded for all candidates, but it is disappointingly absent even from the non-paper that presented a 'catalogue of options' (on which, more below).

Both can be done through simple decisions of the Council, without the need for new legislation. Unanimity would be reserved for concluding the cluster/chapter process, drafting the Treaty of Accession and finally ratifying it.

THE STAGED ACCESSION/GRADUAL INTEGRATION/SECTORAL INTEGRATION NEXUS

The original Staged Accession proposal by CEPS and EPC (Belgrade) from September 2021 set out several stages, with a candidate country only passing to the next stage once they had achieved a certain level of conformity with the requirements of each of the 33 negotiating chapters, with a corresponding increase in financial contributions and participation in the EU institutions.

These ideas were much discussed at the time but nothing happened until the Commission launched its 'Reform Growth Facility' for the Western Balkans in 2023, which specified intermediate reform packages, alongside increased EU funding (both grants and loans), subject to detailed conditions on the levels of compliance candidate countries needed to

achieve. This complex mechanism has also been linked with 'Gradual Integration', implying the frontloading of certain benefits and obligations of EU membership before formal accession. Crucially, unlike the original Staged Accession proposal, this gradual integration would be an additional sub-system, referencing the formal accession methodology but running parallel to it, alongside predictable statements that this wouldn't be an alternative to full accession, but rather a way to accelerate the whole process.

The initiative is endowed with EUR 4 billion in grants and EUR 2 billion in loans under the current MFF for 2024-27. So far, the release of funding hasn't been uniform across the region, with mostly Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia receiving the funding, while the other three countries are lagging in terms of meeting the conditions to receive funding. This overall result confirms the divide between the countries while adding to the complexity of the conditionality mechanisms.

Similar Reform and Growth Facilities have also been put forward for Ukraine (EUR 50 billion) and Moldova (EUR 1.9 billion). As the two countries have been meeting their conditions to access funding, they have received the regular payments distributed through these Facilities.

Another related non-paper by five Member States (this time Austria, the Czech Republic, Italy, Slovakia and Slovenia) advocates sectoral integration ahead of accession for much of the internal market, which would include energy markets, 'green lanes', the digital single market, transport and logistics, critical raw materials and an Agreement on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Products (ACAA). The Commission was invited to specify how to allow elements of market access and policy inclusion when a candidate country has made good progress in certain sectors.

Examples of pre-accession sectoral access to elements of the single market have already been seen in the cases of roaming, the Single European Payments Area and – especially important for Ukraine – integration into the European electricity grid. Of the various elements cited in the non-paper, an ACAA is potentially very useful for providing seamless access to the single market for manufactured goods, but the technical prerequisites here are very heavy, as years of still incomplete preparations by Ukraine have shown.

A more radical version of sectoral integration was floated in March 2026 by the Prime Minister of Albania and President of Serbia on being willing to accede to the single market and Schengen area without the political rights and veto power of full membership, which sounds very much like joining the European Economic Area, rather than the EU. This led Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos to comment that the two objectives had much the same arduous requirements as for full membership, so wouldn't be a fast-track solution.

ENHANCED STATUS BEFORE CONVENTIONAL MEMBERSHIP

For Ukraine, Chancellor Merz addressed an official letter (not just a 'non-paper') to the leadership of the EU institutions proposing the opening of all clusters without delay and the creation of 'associate membership' status coupled to non-voting participation in all the institutions (Council, Parliament, Commission and even the Court of Justice). There should be full participation in the Common Foreign and Security Policy, with the security guarantee provision of Article 42.7 TEU being specifically mentioned. The term 'associate membership' provokes the critical comment that Ukraine already has an Association Agreement. A better alternative wording could be 'acceding Member State', which was proposed in an earlier German non-paper from April 2026. For Moldova and the Western Balkans, Chanceller Merz also advocated for 'innovative solutions', including observer status in the EU institutions, but without further elaboration.

Ukraine is already receiving unprecedented financial support from the EU, from the combination of the EUR 90 billion loan package for macroeconomic needs and defence procurement for 2026-27 and the Ukraine Facility from 2024-27 with EUR 50 billion of grants and loans destined, among other things, to support the Ukrainian economy and its reconstruction. This exceptional aid, together with the EUR 90 billion loan, does much to compensate the US' cut of financial support to virtually zero. Since the outbreak of the war, the EU has been Ukraine's largest financial supporter.

A non-paper by France advocates 'enhanced gradual integration' for all candidate states, with the establishment of an 'integrated state' status, which would be conditional on having achieved sufficient progress on the fundamentals. The benefits of this regime would include gradual non-voting integration into the main EU institutions, some (unspecified) benefits for the citizens of the candidate countries, and participation in certain policy areas; but access to the Common Agricultural Policy and cohesion policy should be postponed until full accession. While the text says that this wouldn't be an alternative to full membership, the choice of wording for 'integrated state' status would also be consistent with creating a lasting parallel regime of upgraded pre-accession integration.

With France and Germany as the two most influential Member States, the significance of these proposals can hardly be underestimated. While separate, one for Ukraine and the other for all candidates, the proposals are complementary and mutually consistent. They could be quickly adopted by the European Council and operationalised without a need for treaty changes.

FURTHER ISSUES FOR THE EU

SAFEGUARDS AGAINST BACKSLIDING

Another of the non-papers (by France, Germany and the Benelux states) set out an extensive 'catalogue of options' for future accession treaties, including an increased set of safeguard clauses, transitional measures limiting full funding from the common agricultural and cohesion policies, and a staged approach to labour mobility. Safeguard clauses going beyond the fields covered in recent enlargements relate to democratic principles and media freedom.

One potentially important safeguard clause would be a 'temporary deviation' ('temporary' because it could be done without a treaty change) from the procedural rules governing the application of Article 7 TEU that can suspend a Member State's Council voting rights when it deviates from EU values, using a four-fifths majority rule instead of unanimity (of course, with the exception of the targeted state) for the final decision. The existing unanimity requirement was why the Article 7 mechanism proposed in 2017-18 for Poland and Hungary could never be applied. Newly acceding Member States could also have a temporary limitation on veto voting rights, as CEPS and EPC advocated for in their 2021 'staged accession' proposal. The catalogue of options also includes a 'non-regression clause' in relation to EU values as a binding norm, with a breach potentially having financial consequences.

ADAPTING EU INSTITUTIONS AND POLICIES

Long overdue are proposals from the Commission to ensure the next enlargements don't paralyse the functioning of the EU. At the least ambitious level there's support for a new generation of Accession Treaties with the transitional measures mentioned to delay full implementation of agricultural, cohesion and labour market policies, which would build on precedents set in the most recent enlargements.

More fundamental would be extending QMV through use of the *'passerelle'* Article 48(7) TEU, yet this switch would require unanimity. The Commission has also stated the need for Member States to resort to 'constructive abstention' under Article 31(1) TEU whenever their isolated position on a given topic would otherwise obstruct Council unanimity. There's also the long-dormant provision of the Treaty under Article 17(5) that would limit the number of Commissioners to two-thirds of the number of Member States 'unless the European Council acting unanimously decides to alter this number', which it has done by continuing with one Commissioner per Member State.

On all these matters, the EU's long overdue pre-enlargement reforms and policy review will be crucial.

THE WELL-QUALIFIED CANDIDATE BLOCKED BY A VETO

There are no official ideas or proposal over how to handle the situation where a candidate state has met all chapter and cluster requirements, but their accession has been vetoed by a Member State, either at the negotiation, treaty of accession or ratification stage.

North Macedonia's case has illustrated the power of vetoes over the enlargement process: Greece first blocked its accession over the long-running name dispute, which was finally resolved by the 2018 Prespa Agreement, while Bulgaria has subsequently blocked progress due to disputes concerning history, language and identity – all issues completely unrelated to the EU's accession criteria. More recently Hungary kept blocking the opening of the clusters for Ukraine, even after it had met the requisite criteria. The issue of bilateral disputes will potentially surface again as the Western Balkan candidate countries continue to move through the enlargement process. To handle this, an explicit policy framework should be developed.

There are two conceivable scenarios where a blocking veto could arise. First, ratification could fail due to the position of a Member State government, but also when referendum requirements get in the way, as was the case when an advisory referendum in the Netherlands in 2016 effectively blocked the ratification of the EU's Association Agreement with Ukraine – until a political solution was later found.

The second case is where a Member State government has blocked ratification for broad ideological or political reasons, such as following a change of government after its predecessor allowed the entire process to reach the ratification stage. For a candidate state that had undergone years – or even decades – of preparing for membership, this would be a political disaster both for the candidate state and for the EU's overall reputation.

These scenarios are likely to emerge and thus remedies are needed. One CEPS proposal is that when a candidate reaches all the requirements for membership, the Commission should designate it as a 'Nominated Member State', before the Treaty of Accession is prepared. Going with this, the Council should agree that the candidate state is entitled to full participation in the policies, funding and institutions of the EU, with the only exception being voting rights. This would in part resemble elements of the German and French proposals above. In the CEPS proposal, full accession with follow full ratification. If, for whatever reason, ratification failed, the candidate country would retain the status of Nominated Member State with full participation until a consensus is found.

SIMPLIFICATION

The general commitment to 'simplification and streamlining' announced at the start of the second von der Leyen Commission has not yet been applied to the enlargement process. On the contrary, the enlargement process has become even more complex with the bureaucratically burdensome process of the Growth Plans for the candidate countries.

The same CEPS proposal advanced far-reaching proposals for simplification. The basis for this would be comprehensive ratings for each candidate on each chapter that the Commission provides in its annual Enlargement Package. These can easily be quantified, which permits aggregation and averaging. The Commission could make the additional funding offered under the Growth Plans conditional on meeting specified levels of ratings, replacing the Growth Plans' separate conditionality system. This would also provide more incentives for progressing with the chapters and clusters of the regular accession process.

THE EU'S SECURITY AND COMPETITIVENESS STRATEGIES

The EU already recognises enlargement as part of building a stronger and more secure Europe. As President von der Leyen put it, enlargement is 'a geostrategic imperative' and 'a long-term investment in our peace, stability and security'. High Representative Kaja Kallas put the same point even more starkly: 'Enlargement is not a "nice to have", it is a necessity if we want to be a stronger player on the world stage.' However, enlargement is crucially not yet a formal part of the EU's security or competitiveness strategies.

The evidence from previous enlargement rounds clearly shows that a larger EU can become more prosperous, resilient and strategically capable. However, the next enlargement is still too often discussed in terms of costs rather than benefits, even though budgetary and adjustment costs are frequently overstated relative to the broader gains. Instead, the next enlargement wave could strengthen EU competitiveness through greater defence-industrial capacity and expertise – especially from Ukraine – as well as through nearshoring, better connectivity, access to critical raw materials, a larger pool of skilled labour and stronger digital and start-up ecosystems.

Seen in this light, enlargement should be treated not simply as a cost of securing Europe's neighbourhood, but as a strategic investment in the EU's overall prosperity, security and geopolitical weight.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Protect the merit-based accession process and build stronger safeguards against democratic backsliding.

The Commission's pre-enlargement policy reviews should propose mechanisms that **clearly separate bilateral disputes from assessing candidates' compliance with the Copenhagen criteria and the EU *acquis***. Issues that don't relate directly to accession requirements should not be allowed to block the opening or closing of negotiating clusters or otherwise hold up a candidate that has met the relevant benchmarks. Bilateral disputes should instead be channelled through dedicated mediation or dispute-resolution mechanisms outside the accession negotiations.

At the same time, the EU should examine **legally viable ways of introducing QMV for intermediate procedural decisions in the accession process**, while preserving unanimity for the final admission of a new Member State as required by the Treaties.

Finally, the experience of Hungary and Poland has shown how difficult it can be for the EU to respond once serious rule-of-law deterioration occurs after accession. **Future Accession Treaties should contain stronger and more operational post-accession safeguards**, particularly for countries where democratic institutions remain vulnerable. These could include enhanced rule-of-law monitoring for a defined period after accession, clearly specified benchmarks, accelerated procedures for suspending access to selected EU funds or other membership benefits in cases of backsliding, and mechanisms allowing proportionate restrictions on participation rights.

Such **safeguards should complement, rather than replace, the EU's existing Article 7 and budgetary conditionality instruments**.

2. Turn gradual integration into a structured pathway towards membership

Gradual integration is already delivering tangible benefits to the candidate countries through easier access to the EU's Single Market. **The Commission should now set out a clearer roadmap** specifying what further integration could take place before accession, the reforms required to unlock each step, and the corresponding rights and benefits.

Deepening economic integration should also be matched by deepening political integration, for example through candidate countries' progressively deeper involvement in the EU's decision-shaping agencies, programmes and policies in areas where they have aligned with the *acquis*, without conferring formal voting rights before the formal accession. **A transparent sequence of benchmarks and benefits** would make the

accession process more tangible, reward progress in making reforms and reduce the long political gap between candidate status and full membership.

3. Enshrine EU enlargement into the EU's security and competitiveness policies.

As the EU's current enlargement wave was primarily revived by geopolitical and security concerns, **enlargement can no longer be treated primarily as a neighbourhood policy but as an integral instrument of the EU's security, economic and geopolitical strategy.** EU policies on security, defence, energy, connectivity and industrial competitiveness should explicitly identify enlargement and integrating candidate countries as instruments for achieving EU strategic objectives. This would help shift the political calculus around enlargement: rather than being seen primarily as a process that entails costs and risks for the EU, enlargement would be treated as an investment in overall European security, resilience and competitiveness.

CONCLUSIONS

The huge pile up of proposals and informal ideas now in circulation from Member States, the EU institutions and independent think tanks provide the EU institutions with a lot of material for reaching important decisions on the future of the EU enlargement process before the end of 2026. The political case for this is evident. The plethora of proposals on their own highlight the widespread recognition that such decisions are needed. However, alongside continued assurances that full membership is the ultimate goal, the proposals around gradual integration are also consistent with creating a parallel default regime of increasing but incomplete integration, essentially leading to 'almost-membership'. Indeed, Member States are still holding back on key ideas that would enhance the regular accession process, such as using QMV for intermediate steps in the accession process.

The strong trend among the official ideas of many Member States is to reduce the gap between where gradual integration could lead and full membership. With proposals for institutional participation in the institutions' policy-setting meetings, with speaking rights but no vote, the gap could become vanishingly small as most decisions at the European Council (and ordinary Councils) are taken without a vote. Independent observers may freely recommend more clearcut institutional changes, often requiring treaty revisions, but these seem to gain little traction with Member States mindful of domestic political constraints.

The old paradigm of concentric circles shows its continuing relevance not only with the current gradual integration process, but also with other developments: the huge commitments being made to Ukraine, a country at war, the new EU-Swiss 'Package' signed in March 2026 and the UK seeking to define a new and close relationship. The

entire 'wider Europe' has seen a slight institutional advance since 2022 in the form of the half-yearly summits of the European Political Community. President von der Leyen, in her 2026 State of the Union address, even proposed 'associate membership' for Canada, which was clearly welcomed by Prime Minister Carney at the European Parliament the following day. While this is currently just a new concept in search of the legal and political framework, this development shows that the EU is increasingly looking for flexible and effective formats for deeper cooperation with like-minded countries – even those outside of Europe.

Enlargement and 'almost-membership' policies run into each other as a seemingly organic process with a continuously evolving spectrum of varieties, a retreat *de facto* from the absolute commitment to enlargement in the 2003 Thessaloniki Declaration. Yet it shouldn't be surprising if this were to translate into instability and even defection from European values among disappointed candidate states. The case for the EU to reform itself to accommodate real enlargement hasn't disappeared.

At a time when enlargement is gaining renewed geopolitical importance, Iceland's recent referendum on restarting accession negotiations, which went with a majority of 52.8 % against, is a reminder that the attractiveness of EU membership can never be taken for granted, even among countries that are already deeply integrated with the EU.

At the end of the day, EU membership is like a marriage – advisable only when both parties are absolutely convinced. Otherwise, they can (and should) remain the best of friends.

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