



**CEPS POLICY BRIEF**

# **HOW TO RADICALLY SIMPLIFY AND STREAMLINE THE EU ENLARGEMENT PROCESS**

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**September 2025-05**

## SUMMARY

Over the last year the EU's enlargement process has seen the implementation of a new 'gradual integration' concept, allowing for some modest elements of single market access and additional funding before full accession, but conditional on a complex set of policy reforms.

Intended to re-dynamise the enlargement process, which is constrained by very onerous decision-making rules in the Council, this concept adds a fresh layer of bureaucratic complexity to the system, without directly advancing the formal accession process. This goes against the European Commission's new pledge to simplify policy regulations to boost the EU's geopolitical influence.

Additionally, several Member States are now specifically pushing the Commission to propose a way to simplify and streamline the enlargement process – but without saying how this might be done.

This CEPS Policy Brief does provide a structured proposal, centered on three essential features:

- The Commission should abandon waiting for Member States' unanimity at every single step in the negotiation process. This relatively recent practice has no basis in EU law and should be dropped. The Commission should run the negotiations according to the general mandate given to it by the Council.
- To simplify the enlargement process, parallel activity tracks need to be integrated into a single central mechanism for monitoring candidates' progress which should be based on the annual Enlargement Package. The Commission should also numerically rate candidate countries' levels of compliance with the 35 chapters of the *acquis*. Member States in the Council would be able to raise questions over the Commission's ratings, possibly leading the Commission to make revisions.
- When a candidate country obtains the required level of ratings, the Commission would propose to grant it the status of 'Nominated Member State' in a Treaty of Accession. If supported unanimously by Member States, full accession would follow. If not, the Nominated Member State would still gain full access to the EU's policies and funding but with observer status only (i.e. no vote) in the Council and Parliament's decision-making. It would retain this status until Member States reach unanimity for full accession.



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## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of her second mandate as European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen launched a simplification agenda to reduce administrative burdens and enhance the EU's global competitiveness. She has promised '[more simplification on the way](#)' beyond the Commission's [first operational proposal](#) in February 2025, which was geared towards businesses.

The EU's enlargement policy should be the focus of the next proposal for two reasons. First, the Commission's actions in 2023-24 went completely in the opposite direction by increasing the complexity of an already long and cumbersome process. Second, the simplification proposals advocated in this CEPS Policy Brief also fit with the need to increase transparency, reduce administrative burdens – for candidate countries' public administrations and the EU itself – and re-dynamise the enlargement process to enhance the EU's international competitiveness in both geopolitical and geoeconomic terms.

Support for 'simplification and streamlining' of the excessively complex enlargement status quo came in August in a letter by four Member States (Germany, Italy, Slovenia and Austria) to Commissioner Kos, who's responsible for enlargement. In the letter two points stand out: first, it sees a swift and efficient enlargement process as part and parcel of the EU's strategic response to the new geopolitical environment following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's support to Russia, and the increasing unreliability of the US as a geopolitical ally. Second the letter invites the Commission to table proposals to 'simplify and streamline' the enlargement process... but without giving any indication on how this might be done.

Providing a solid proposal is the precise purpose of this CEPS Policy Brief. Its close timing with the letter sent to the Commission is completely coincidental but this only serves to encourage further work to build a consensus over how to achieve the goal of a simplified and streamlined enlargement process.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ENLARGEMENT PROCESS

There have been important developments in the enlargement process since Russia invaded Ukraine in March 2022. Only three months later, in June 2022, the EU agreed to give Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia ‘membership perspectives’, also granting ‘candidate status’ to Ukraine and Moldova, thus leading them into the regular accession procedures. It also proposed substantially increased financial assistance for Ukraine with the EUR 50 billion ‘[Facility](#)’, which only became operational in March 2024 due to difficult internal negotiations with Hungary.

Concerned that the Western Balkans should not feel left behind, in November 2023 the Commission proposed a ‘[Growth Plan](#)’, with an additional EUR 6 billion in funding to be made available, subject to a new and complex set of conditions. This entered into force in May 2024 with the details set out in the associated ‘[Reform and Growth Facility](#)’. Moldova was later added to the facility after a Commission proposal in October 2024, with its [Growth Plan](#) coupled to EUR 1.9 billion of fresh funding.

These developments have gone hand-in-hand with a new conceptualisation of the enlargement process to include ‘[gradual integration](#)’, which aims to deliver some of the benefits of membership step-by-step before full accession – again, subject to conditions. These benefits can be through increased funding and/or gaining limited access to the EU’s single market.

The precise mechanisms on how this would work differ between the Ukraine Facility and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, mainly due to including war-related reconstruction in the Ukraine Facility. Also, the EU-Ukraine and EU-Moldova Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) already provided ‘internal market treatment’ for four sectors, including financial markets and telecommunications, and the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans also provides similar opportunities.

The ‘facilities’ embody the gradual integration idea, with two features relevant to the enlargement process. First, there are the selected elements of internal market access identified as priorities. Each of these market access elements have to be justified by adopting the EU *acquis* in question.

Second, and the more complex of the two, is the conditionality attached to the Growth Plan’s extra funding. For this the candidate countries have to submit proposed Reform Agendas, which in part concern the political and rule of law fundamentals, plus some issues not subject to the EU *acquis*, such as education policy. The Commission has been adopting these Reform Agendas alongside extremely detailed conditions attached to the

increased funding, as exemplified by [Albania](#), where there are 122 specific measures grouped under 18 sectoral chapters.

These conditions considerably overlap with the requirements for opening and closing chapters but these are entirely separate sub-systems. The extra funding under the facilities is subject to half-yearly timelines for implementation between December 2024 and December 2027. If the conditions aren't met, payments are to be proportionately scaled down.

So far it's too early to know whether the Growth Plans are accelerating candidate countries' efforts to comply with the *acquis*, and thus the formal process of membership negotiations. It's clear, however, that the complexity of the overlapping but separate conditionality regimes has resulted in heavier bureaucracy in both the EU *and* candidate countries.

## THE ACCESSION PROCEDURE AS A WHOLE... IS AN OBSTACLE COURSE

All these recent developments have left the core formal accession procedure unchanged, where the 35 chapters covering the EU *acquis* are grouped into six thematic clusters. The Council has required that each step for the opening and closing of each chapter be subject to the unanimous agreement of all Member States. Yet this complex system is relatively new, having been first used for Croatia's accession in 2013 as a way to avoid the problem of some of the 2004-07 new Member States not fully respecting the *acquis* after their accession.

However, the resulting system has become a seemingly insurmountable obstacle course for the newest candidate countries.

The unanimity rule used in the Council for all these steps is not required by the Treaty and has been simply adopted as a working method. This practice is extremely cumbersome, with various Member States vetoing proposed decisions on occasion, sometimes notoriously for reasons not at all connected to the accession process (e.g. Bulgaria insisting that Northern Macedonia [change its constitution](#) to recognise Bulgarians as a founding people of the country).

This excessive use of unanimity in low level decision-making has been universally criticised by independent observers as archaic and dysfunctional. In 2024, Germany and Slovenia proposed shifting to qualified majority voting for the opening of chapters, but there couldn't even be an agreement on this.

An enormous set of background documents (in all over 1 000 pages) underlying the process is published annually by the Commission in its '[Enlargement Package](#)', where

every chapter for each candidate country is analysed in great detail. Almost all chapters receive a qualitative summary rating of preparedness for accession on a five-level scale: 'advanced', 'good', 'moderate', 'some' or 'early' preparedness. Additionally, the Commission specifies up to three bulleted priority measures to each chapter that the candidate country would need to address.

The annual enlargement packages are a precious and transparent source that should be used more structurally in the procedures, rather than just serve as simple background information, as is currently the case. There are also three weaknesses in how this data is presented and used.

First, the qualitative ratings ('good', 'moderate' etc.) should be paired with their numerical equivalent, which would allow for aggregation and averaging with possible weights by chapter. This could easily be done and various independent research centres, (including [our own](#)) already do this.

This links to the second weakness, namely that the Commission gives absolutely no indication over the level of ranking of individual chapters, or the average for all chapters, needed for formal accession. This results in huge uncertainty for every candidate country and a lack of transparency in the entire system.

Finally, all the information gathered in the enlargement packages is not used in any formally structured way in the accession procedures themselves, a crucial factor which will now be explored in more detail below.

## OUR PROPOSALS

From 2021 to 2023, the present authors, together with partners at the Belgrade-based [European Policy Centre](#), published detailed proposals for a '[Staged Accession](#)' methodology that would correct all the above weaknesses, with a candidate country's promotion from stage to stage depending on transparently achieving certain numerically weighted average ratings.

These proposals received considerable attention in official EU circles, the Member States and candidate countries, as well as among independent think tanks and academia. The broad idea of candidate countries conditionally gaining benefits before their accession is echoed in the official 'gradual integration' initiative – except that the latter is beset by the weaknesses already discussed above, including its heavy additional complexity (alongside the formal procedure) and all the extra administrative burdens.

Our new proposal has three essential features, as detailed below.

### 1.) *Simplification – a single central mechanism based on the enlargement packages*

The new ‘gradual integration’ initiative is an attempt to create a new dynamic. But it does so with a highly complex additional system of conditional funding, without confronting the reasons why the formal accession process hardly moves forward. The parallel tracks function as follows:

- In the formal accession process, Member States in the Council negotiate the conditions for opening and closing chapters with the candidates in Intergovernmental Conferences (IGCs), with every step subject to unanimity – which is why the system is largely blocked.
- The gradual integration process adds Commission-managed funding which is conditional on around 100 criteria which partly overlap with the conditions being negotiated in the IGCs – and even if candidate countries fulfil these 100 or so ‘extra’ criteria, it has no measurable impact on the formal accession process.
- In the gradual integration process the Commission has identified a limited number of single market elements to which a candidate country could gain access, so long as they comply with the relevant *acquis* – but again, with no formal impact on the actual accession process.

**Our proposal is to build on the existing Enlargement Package documents, which would become the central mechanism for moving the accession process along,** and not merely providing background information as is the case now. These annual reports would remain mostly the same but with some critical improvements:

- **Chapter ratings would be quantified and aggregated on the five-level scale** (as above), averaging the 35 chapter ratings with appropriate weights.
- The Commission **would indicate each chapter’s required target levels and the standard required for the average of all chapters** before it recommends a candidate country’s formal accession.
- The conditions attached to the increased funding under the Growth Plans for the Western Balkans and Moldova **would hang upon specified improvements in the ratings for given chapters, thus integrating what are currently separate parallel tracks.**
- Comparable arrangements would be made for the Ukraine Facility, while also taking into account the exceptional wartime circumstances this country faces.

These measures would result in increased transparency for citizens in both EU Member States and candidate countries, and would help revitalise some of the aspirant members’ motivation to make the necessary reforms.

Normally these procedures would be based on the annual cycle of Enlargement Package reports but the timing could be adapted if urgently required.

### *2.) Drop Council unanimity for all intermediate steps*

The Commission should abandon its habit of waiting for Member States' unanimity at every single step in the negotiation process. Apart from the initial decision to accept a membership application and the decision at the end to agree on the accession conditions, nowhere in EU law does it state that unanimity is required for all the interim steps in the pre-accession process. This relatively recent practice can and should be dropped, with the Commission running the negotiations according to its general institutional mandate.

Member States in the Council would have [consultative opportunities](#) to question the Commission's ratings, possibly leading the Commission to make revisions.

### *3.) Embrace 'Nominated Member State' status*

As and when the Commission assesses a candidate country as finally ready for accession, it would then propose a Treaty of Accession and bestow 'Nominated Member State' status on the candidate country.

The draft Accession Treaty would be submitted to the Council for a unanimous decision – as required by the Treaty. If and when this is achieved, full accession would happen in the usual way, with transitional measures attached.

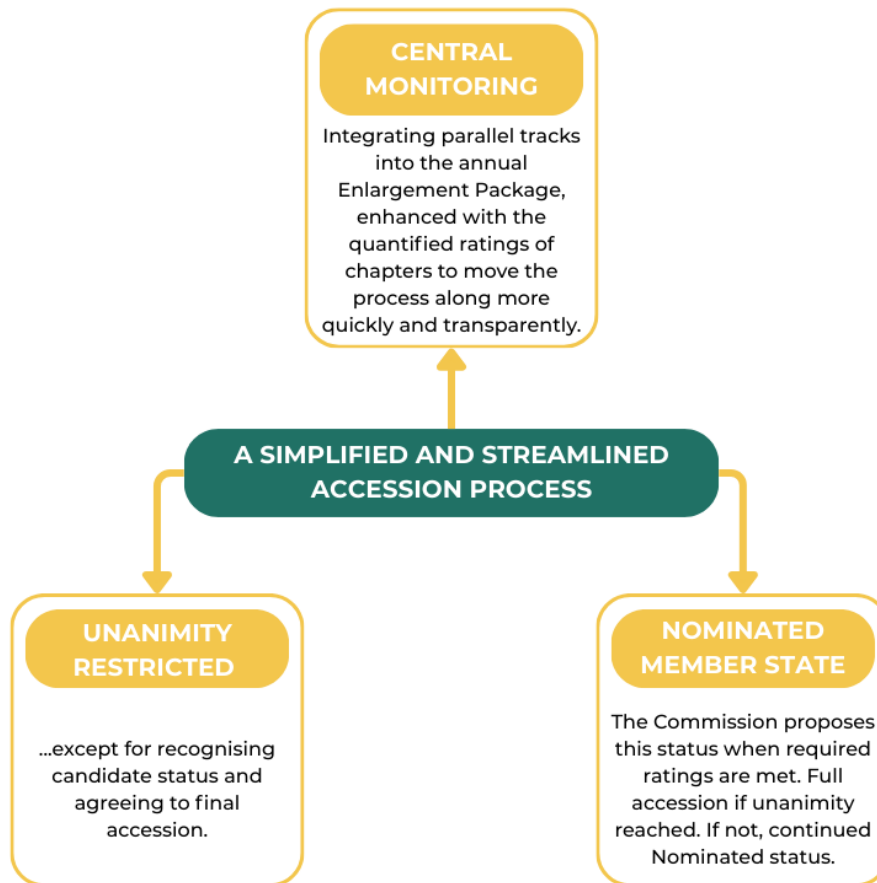
If, however, unanimous support isn't achieved, the candidate country would remain a 'Nominated Member State'. Following the philosophy of the gradual integration mechanisms, it would then be entitled to full functional participation in EU policies and funding (and be liable to contribute to the general budget) as if it were a full Member State. Only its role in the decision-making bodies of the Council and European Parliament would be restricted to observer status (i.e. unable to vote).

The legal basis for this decision would rely on the existing Association Agreements (SAAs or DCFTAs), plus accompanying Commission decisions, following the endorsement of standard-setting bodies (like the European Payments Council for the Single Euro Payments Area), as detailed in EU secondary legislation. **The 'Nominated Member State' status would remain until the European Council is able to vote unanimously for full accession.**

This enhanced role for the Commission in proposing steps in the accession process would be no more than re-asserting its treaty-based responsibilities, which is exactly what the letter mentioned above by the four (small and large) Member States was inviting it to do.



Figure 1. Three fundamental elements for streamlining and simplifying the accession process



Source: authors' own elaboration.

## SOLIDIFYING THE EU'S STRATEGIC POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

Implementing the above measures would reenergise the enlargement process. This is required more than ever for a growing set of (geo)strategic reasons. The EU, Member States and candidate countries are all facing three distinct geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges.

The first is that the current US administration has hugely eroded the credibility of the Atlantic alliance in both security and economic terms. The second is that Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine requires maximum European solidarity. And finally, the EU has to build up its competitiveness to counter China's increasing dominance in international trade.

The EU's further enlargement won't solve these vulnerabilities but it would consolidate the political geography of an EU-based wider Europe, and it would be a logical and necessary step for its overall global strategy. This would go alongside various complementary elements in the recently proposed Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028-34 (such as provisions for Ukraine, food security and defence spending).

## CONCLUSIONS

In short, the increased complexity of the enlargement process could (and should) be met by being radically simplified, both to correct its current dysfunctional internal procedures and to respond to the increasingly pressing geopolitical challenges the EU faces.

Its central feature would be a centralised mechanism based on a structured rating system, providing renewed incentives for the candidate countries to better and more quickly prepare for accession. As and when a candidate reaches the targeted ratings, the Commission would propose a Treaty of Accession, designating the candidate as a 'Nominated Member State'. However, a unanimous vote would still be required in the Council for full accession.

If unanimity cannot be reached, the Nominated Member State would, in accordance with the 'gradual integration' philosophy, be entitled to full participation in all the EU's policies and their funding, but would only have observer status in the decision-making functions of the Council and European Parliament.



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