A Union that Scales

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The European Union is at a pivotal moment in history. By 2026, the existing binary "in or out" approach of enlargement is not keeping pace with the geopolitical demands of the decade. The Triple-Track Strategy proposes (1) the Phased Sectoral Integration for immediate economic integration, (2) the 'Institutional Observership' to socialise political elites and (3) the Reverse-Incentive Rule of Law Mechanism to halt democratic deterioration. Separating technical integration from the final political "veto-gate" allows the EU to stabilise its neighbourhood as it transforms its centre. The analysis below shows that enlargement is not simply a bureaucratic process but the most effective security measure for Europe and a vital element of its strategic independence.

In many ways, international politics is a tale of integration and deterrence. In the wake of the post-2022 European security realignment, enlargement, while a standby solution, has been reconceived in the context of new security challenges such as hybrid warfare and the intricacies of regional strategic geography. If it is true that what's happening in the European periphery is international politics, then enlargement is the continuation, expansion and adaptation of European power. This proposal considers enlargement as a form of functionalism: harnessing the economic benefits of the Single Market. Historically, enlargement has not received much attention from the academic community, but the 'absorption anxiety' of the EU members has put it at the forefront of the strategic debate.

The main challenge in 2026 is not the candidates' reluctance, but the EU's 'absorption anxiety'. The paradox revolves around three key tensions. First, the 'Veto Trap': Member states worry that new members will render

the EU decision-making process ineffective, particularly in foreign policy. In the past, individual countries have leveraged the unanimity rule to wrest concessions on bilateral issues. The second is the 'Rule of Law Ghost': The 'ghost of Hungary' looms over the current negotiations, causing member states to fear admitting new members without irreversible safeguards for the rule of law. Third, 'Budgetary Friction': Admitting a large agricultural superpower such as Ukraine means

redesigning the entire Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Funds, which current beneficiaries feel as a zero-sum game on their own development resources.

Enlargement is now no longer an administrative process, but Europe's most valuable security policy. Ukraine and the Western Balkans are removed from the "grey zone" of Russia and China as they become a part of the EU, delivering a "Security Dividend". As discussed in the 2024 Draghi Report on Competitiveness, a bigger Union means a bigger Single Market, strengthening the EU position in world trade and climate strategies – 'The Brussels Effect 2.0'. Strategic autonomy needs size and the current proposal calls for the EU to think of expansion as a start-up scaling up, not a liability.

The Triple-Track Strategy overcomes the paradoxes of EU enlargement by unbundling the technical, institutional and normative aspects of EU integration into three distinct but interconnected tracks. Each track will bring tangible benefits for the candidates while minimising the political costs for the EU member states.

Track I aims to adopt a "Single Market First" approach that allows candidates to access the Single Market and European Green Deal instruments prior to joining the Union. Once they meet technical standards, candidates benefit from immediate economic relief, making the reform "pain" acceptable to their citizens. This builds on the experience of the European Economic Area and the Energy Community, which is expanded to other policy areas. The staggered integration model also enables selective integration: candidates can join the Digital Single Market, the Green Deal regulatory regime and the Schengen Information System before becoming members. This creates economic benefits that help to overcome domestic reform fatigue.

The 'Reversibility Clause' is the key to institutional resilience. A new treaty should include a provision for QMV suspension of funding and voting rights if a new member fails to uphold Article 2 values. This turns the current impotent Article 7 process into a rule-based deterrent mechanism.

The dynamic reversibility mechanism builds on the conditionality principle embedded in the EU's Rule of Law Regulation (2020/2092) to post-accession. By rendering EU benefits contingent on a country's democratic performance, the EU can plausibly threaten backsliding instead of the ineffectual threat of Article 7.

Thinking outside the box means solving the 'Circular Mobility' problem. Too fast integration might lead to a 'brain drain' from aspiring countries.

A 'Reform Diaspora Fund' to encourage young professionals to return and lead the newly merged institutions would provide a solution to this problem. And we must recognise 'Strategic Autonomy 2.0'. Unless the EU scales up to be a geopolitical player, it risks being a regulatory colony. This article calls for a "Modular Menu" of integration, where relatively less damaging measures such as suspending mutual recognition in particular areas allow for better and more politically palatable enforcement of Rule of Law requirements than "nuclear" options like suspending all funds.

The EU must be a "Union that Scales" to win the 21st Century. Expansion should not be seen as a problem but as an opportunity. Through staged integration and automatic rule-of-law mechanisms, it is possible to create a Wider Europe that is more peaceful, more prosperous and more united. The Triple-Track Strategy ensures that the EU does not expand into weakness, but into a more powerful global player able to implement its values and interests in an increasingly multipolar world. The experience of the Bonn-Copenhagen criteria years, the big-bang enlargement of 2004, and the subsequent backsliding experiences all suggest that enlargement is a necessary but not sufficient component of a strategy for reform: enlargement without reform is unsustainable, but reform without enlargement is insufficient.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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