EU Enlargement

27 MAY 2026
Valerie Panatas

Name: Valerie Panatas

The Problem

The Solution

The suggestion of "staged integration" or gradual accession is the leading solution shared among experts and EU policymakers for the EU's paradox (Nagornyak and Shalamberidze, 2025). This incremental model structures membership into phases, where each phase grants more benefits and rights, with the tradeoff of more responsibilities. Countries wishing to undergo this process must sign an Association Agreement, complete a basic verification of democratic progress, and receive a positive opinion from the European Commission. This opinion must state that the country is not at immediate risk of state collapse or war, except for defence against ongoing external threats, as in the case of Ukraine. The advancement is centered on a clear, measurable criterion:

Stage 1: Association for Integration (+/- 3 years)

This stage aims to integrate the candidate into low-risk EU policies that are highly beneficial, without giving them high decision-making power. This stage develops trust and partnership between assimilating members and current members. Countries will receive access to the single market, where they will have access to energy, digital services, and agricultural products. However, this access is limited as there is no free movement of capital or labor yet. In addition to that, integrating countries can enjoy zero tariffs on 90% of goods, with the exception of sensitive items like steel and dairy. Citizens can also enjoy visa-free travel to the Schengen area for short stays (90 days). Candidate countries will also receive a Pre-Accession Assistance Fund of €5 billion

annually. Lastly, these countries will have access to EU programmes like Horizon Europe and Erasmus, to assimilate the country's culture and citizens.

This stage requires countries to align 80% of their national foreign policy with the EU's goals and interests, where they are required to submit quarterly reports on the progress of this alignment. Moreover, countries should adopt a binding anti-corruption action plan with regular progress reports as well as judicial reforms to the EU's standards. To exit this stage, countries

must pass 10 anti-corruption laws, establish an independent judiciary verified by the Venice Commission, and experience no democratic backsliding for 12 consecutive months.

Stage 2: Accession Partnership (Years 3-6)

This stage grants near-full economic integration, with limited institutional voice. This stage aims to test whether candidates can handle full membership responsibilities. Candidates will experience free movement of goods, services, and capital, as well as access to EU agencies like EASA and EMA. Movement of labor will have a cap, where citizens from candidate countries can work in EU countries, but take no more than 3% of the host country's labor force in any year. This cap will expire after the 6th year if there is no violation. This stage also grants the candidate country access to the European Regional Development Fund of around €15 billion annually. However, candidate countries are expected to contribute 0.5% GDP to the EU budget, in comparison to a member's required 1% of GDP. Lastly, candidates are granted an observer status in the European Council, where they are allowed a voice but cannot veto.

In addition to the required contribution of 0.5% of GDP, candidates are required to adopt all EU environmental, competition, and transport rules. Moreover, they must accept the European Court of Justice's jurisdiction on single market cases. They are also expected to fully adopt the EU equality directives regarding anti-discrimination laws related to race, gender, disability, age, and sexual orientation. There will be continued annual monitoring from the European Commission, but with binding recommendations where candidates must follow orders or risk demotion. To exit this stage, they are required to complete three consecutive years of rule-of-law monitoring without any violations, close the gap of corruption with the EU average, achieve a GDP per capita of at least 50% of the EU average, and hold a national referendum where the majority of voters and regions approve final membership.

Stage 3: Full Membership

This stage aims to establish and grant full rights and responsibilities, but with a budget transition period to mitigate fiscal burdens on member states. This grants members full

membership status, including full voting rights in the European Council in all policy areas, full representation in the European Parliament, full access to EU funds, and the eligibility to join Schengen and Eurozone, with the requirement of the Council decision and meeting the Maastricht criteria, respectively. The contribution to the EU budget will be incremental, where they start off by receiving full benefits without paying, and gradually phase in by 20% of the full rate every two years. All EU laws apply effectively immediately after the integration date, and there is no opting out of the European Court of Justice jurisdiction. There will also be full freedom of movement, no caps or restrictions on labor, goods, or services. There is also an expectation of 100% alignment with the EU's foreign policy objectives.

To facilitate this integration policy, the EU must also undergo internal reforms of removing the national veto on enlargement and foreign policy, granting fair access to the EU funds, and formulating a plan for democratic backsliding. The first reform is centered on the idea that one country cannot just block a candidate's accession for domestic interests; these decisions require a vote from member states, and any prevention must have a majority vote. The second reform solves the problem of current members having to pay for new members, through reallocating funds within the existing EU budget without increasing net contributors' payments. Lastly, the third reform enables the European Commission to hold a country's advancement when democratic backsliding occurs. This initiates a deterring effect where candidate countries face real consequences, which will result in a well-rooted democratic reform, unlike the case of Hungary, where democratic backsliding occurs after membership was granted.

Conclusion

In today's ever-changing geopolitical scene, the EU has no choice but to become *bigger and better*. This plan introduces gradual assimilation and internal reforms, supported by tangible consequences, which will result in effective change that completes the goal of the EU's enlargement to sustain geopolitical influence with restructured quality to ensure effective expansion.

Bibliography

Beáta Bakó (2025). *Enlargement and the rise of endless conditionality*. [online] The Loop. Available at: https://theloop.ecpr.eu/enlargement-and-the-rise-of-endless-conditionality/#respond [Accessed 28 Apr. 2026].

Nagornyak, I. and Shalamberidze, M. (2025). *How staged integration can revitalise EU enlargement*. [online] The Loop. Available at: https://theloop.ecpr.eu/how-staged-integration-can-revitalise-eu-enlargement/#respond [Accessed 28 Apr. 2026].