Policy Proposal: Accession Optimisation

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Policy Proposal

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Problem: enlargement has become too slow to remain strategically credible

The EU enlargement process should remain demanding. Candidate countries must meet the Copenhagen criteria, align with the acquis, prove administrative capacity, and protect democracy, human rights, minority rights, and the rule of law. The problem is not that the EU asks too much. The problem is that, even after reforms are verified, progress can still be delayed by unclear timelines, and political bargaining unrelated to the candidate's actual performance. This weakens the EU's credibility and creates reform fatigue inside candidate societies.

This weakness affects the enlargement process as a whole. For candidate countries, accession often feels like a long tunnel: reforms are required immediately, but the main benefits of integration remain distant and politically uncertain. For the EU, this creates a strategic problem. If enlargement is too slow, unpredictable, or vulnerable to obstruction, the Union loses influence over its neighbourhood, weakens pro-European reform coalitions, and allows external actors to exploit frustration and uncertainty.

This proposal therefore introduces an accession optimisation proposals for candidate countries. It combines three reforms: binding procedural deadlines, reinforced-majority voting for intermediate accession steps, and reversible access to EU programmes after verified reform milestones. The policies does not create automatic membership. It creates a rule-based path where reforms are rewarded on time, obstruction must be justified, and enlargement becomes faster, fairer, and more strategically credible.

Naturally, as EU grows bigger, it becomes even more vital to maintain flexibility and avoid institutional sclerosis. What's more, there's a need to find adequate resources to fund its institutional structure. During the last 5 years there's an evident tendency of accumulating momentum in negoti-

ation processes with Moldova, Ukraine and Montenegro in proceeding EU enlargement. It is crucial to keep up the same pace in

order to be able to answer to any challenges that may arise through uncertainty and unpredictability of the current political movements, although bureaucracy can slow down the processes of the EU growing stronger.

Every candidate before becoming a member of European Union has to complete a list of requirements in order to be fit for their role. This process depending on the historical development of the country may take up at many cases 8 or 10 years. During that time it is beneficial for candidates to have additional counseling and while gowing their superstructures aquire resources to proceed on their journey, however long it may be. One of the ways to keep the future EU from discouragement is the "reward system" which would anticipate a system of milestones that a country has to complete and while reaching each of the points, one would get a "reward" for it. For example, gradually accessing the proxy of being a complete member of EU.

A rewards system for candidate countries should be based on the principle of staged integration, where each successfully closed negotiation cluster unlocks specific economic and political preferences without waiting for formal accession. This could include phased access to the EU Single Market for specific sectors, the elimination of roaming charges, joining the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), and a gradual inclusion in structural and cohesion funds to bridge the prosperity gap well before full membership is attained. On a political level, these "rewards" could manifest as observer status in the Council of the EU and the European Parliament for relevant representatives, active participation in the work of European agencies, and enhanced mobility or simplified visa procedures for specific groups like students and entrepreneurs. Such a mechanism creates tangible benefits for both the population and the political elite during the reform process, effectively preventing "enlargement fatigue" and bureaucratic stagnation by transforming a long waiting period into a dynamic series of earned milestones.

Policy 1: Time-bound enlargement decisions

One weakness of the current enlargement process is that it often lacks clear procedural timeframes. A candidate country may complete a required reform step, but the next institutional decision can still be delayed because of political hesitation,

administrative overload, or disagreements among member states. This creates uncertainty for the candidate and weakens the credibility of the EU's conditionality: if reforms do not lead to a visible next step, reform momentum becomes harder to sustain.

We therefore propose introducing procedural time limits for selected stages of the accession process. These limits would not guarantee membership and would not reduce the Copenhagen criteria. They would simply make the process more predictable by requiring EU institutions to respond

within a defined period once a candidate has completed a verified reform milestone.

We propose applying time limits to the following decisions:

(We do not specify the ultimatum terms of these operations, but only give an example. The essence of the idea is to create approximate, clearly specified time limits for these processes.)

If a deadline is missed, we propose that the responsible EU institution should publish a reasoned explanation and place the issue on the agenda of the next relevant Council or European Council meeting. This would not force a positive decision, but it would prevent silent delays and make political obstruction more transparent.

This reform should be understood as a deadline for procedure, not for membership itself. Article 49 TEU would remain fully respected: final accession would still require the accession treaty, consent of the European Parliament, Council

unanimity, and national ratifications. The aim is narrower and more realistic: a merit-based process should mean no progress without reforms, but also no endless waiting after reforms are completed.

Policy 2: Reducing single-state veto power at intermediate stages.

Second, we propose reducing single-state veto power at intermediate and technical stages of the accession process. The problem is not disagreement itself. Member states should be able to raise legitimate concerns about rule of law, democracy, minority rights, administrative capacity, market economy standards, or acquis alignment. The problem arises when one state can freeze the whole process for reasons unrelated to the candidate's actual reform performance.

Therefore, we propose moving from unanimity to reinforced qualified majority voting at selected interim stages, including:

A possible threshold could be support from at least three quarters of member states. This would prevent two extremes: one member state could no longer paralyse the process through unrelated bargaining, but a narrow majority would also not be able to push enlargement forward without broad European consensus.

We propose keeping unanimity for the final accession treaty and national ratification. This makes the reform more politically realistic: member states would retain control over the final act of admission, while the EU would remove the most repetitive veto points from the road leading to that decision.

However, even when a veto or negative vote is used, it should be reasoned and criteria-based. Any government opposing progress should submit a written objection linked to accession criteria, such as rule of law, democracy, minority rights, market economy readiness, administrative capacity, or acquis alignment. If the objection is not clearly connected to these criteria, it should not be accepted as a valid reason to freeze the whole accession process.

Policy 3: Reform-for-access rewards

Third, we propose introducing staged, sector-specific and reversible access to EU programmes for candidate countries when reforms are verified. One weakness of the current enlargement process is that candidates are often asked to implement difficult reforms immediately, while the most visible benefits of integration remain distant. This can create reform fatigue and make EU conditionality feel abstract for citizens, businesses, universities, and public institutions.

The proposed logic is simple: completed reform stage → concrete integration reward. Access would not be automatic, unlimited, or permanent. It would be granted only after verified progress and could be suspended if reforms are reversed.

We propose following models:

Requirement: verified progress in civil service reform, transparency, anti-corruption institutions, public procurement, and judicial independence. **Reward:** deeper participation in EU governance-support programmes, technical assistance, anti-corruption cooperation platforms, and public administration training.

Requirement: credible progress in judicial independence, court efficiency, prosecution reform, protection of fundamental rights, and enforcement of anti-corruption rules.

Reward: access to justice-sector support programmes, EU expert missions, judicial digitalisation support, and rule-of-law monitoring cooperation.

Requirement: progress in competition policy, consumer protection, customs cooperation, product standards, market surveillance, and regulatory alignment with the acquis.

Reward: pilot access to selected single-market instruments, SME support programmes, European standards networks, customs facilitation tools, and business competitiveness initiatives.

Requirement: progress in environmental standards, climate legislation, emissions monitoring, green procurement, and implementation capacity. **Reward:** stronger participation in **LIFE**, climate transition funding, environmental protection projects, and green infrastructure support.

These rewards should remain **conditional, limited, and reversible**. They should not grant voting rights, full single-market access, or full membership benefits before accession. Instead, they would provide practical evidence that reforms produce real results. For candidate countries, this would reduce reform fatigue and strengthen pro-European coalitions. For the EU, it would create a controlled way to test administrative capacity, compliance, and sectoral integration before full membership.

Risks and safeguards

The first risk is that some member states may see reinforced majority voting as a loss of sovereignty. The safeguard is to use a high reinforced

threshold and to retain unanimity for the final accession treaty and national ratification.

The second risk is that staged rewards could be seen as lowering accession standards. The safeguard is strict conditionality, sectoral limitation, regular monitoring, and reversibility. Candidate countries would receive only specific benefits linked to verified reforms, not full membership rights before accession.

The third risk is that procedural deadlines may be interpreted as limiting the quality of assessment. Some may argue that time limits could pressure EU institutions to approve steps too quickly. To prevent this, deadlines should apply to **institutional response**, not to automatic approval. If the Commission or Council concludes that conditions are not met, it should issue a negative or conditional assessment within the deadline, explain the missing benchmarks, and propose a revised roadmap. This protects quality while preventing silent delays.

Conclusion

The geopolitical weight and subjectivity of the European space in modern conditions directly depend on the union's ability to dynamically expand and adapt. The formation of new state associations of an economic, military and political nature acts

not simply as a reaction to external threats, but as a strategic advantage that allows Europe to remain a significant player on the world stage.

In this context, enlargement, including countries such as Ukraine, strengthens the EU's geopolitical position and creates a more stable security environment. The process of attracting new members also forms a broader security framework, which supports the foreign policy stability of all participating states.

An important advantage of enlargement is the stimulation of internal modernization of existing institutions. The need to include new member states forces the European system to qualitatively restructure and improve interstate unions, adapting them to the harsh realities of today. This prevents stagnation and transforms traditional bureaucratic mechanisms into more flexible and effective structures. Thus, enlargement functions as a catalyst for reforms, strengthening unity and competitiveness across Europe.

From an economic point of view, integration processes open up access to new markets and resources, which is critically important for overcoming the consequences of financial crises that periodically arise in EU countries. The enlargement of the Union leads to diversification of economies and stimulates competition and innovation, which ultimately increases overall prosperity.

At the same time, staged access to EU programmes before full membership allows gradual integration and reduces development gaps between member and candidate states. The proposed model replaces long-term un-

certainty with a clearer and more disciplined sequence of accession steps, where reforms lead to concrete decisions within defined timeframes.

From an institutional perspective, limiting the possibility of blocking intermediate decisions by individual member states prevents enlargement from becoming a tool of political bargaining. This ensures a fairer, faster and more predictable enlargement process.

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