Sectoral Integration

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Sectoral integration: external challenges and internal crises as factors in reassessing the effectiveness of EU enlargement

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Introduction

As of 2026, the question of the effectiveness of European Union enlargement has reached critical importance. Traditionally, the EU has functioned primarily as an economic union; however, in the current context, it is increasingly acting as a geopolitical actor. Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine, alongside the gradual decline of the United States' engagement in European security, has intensified the need for strengthening the EU's strategic autonomy-something that is unattainable without further enlargement.

At the same time, the enlargement process itself is significantly constrained by internal structural factors. These include institutional inertia and the complexity of decision-making, particularly due to the unanimity requirement; the limited capacity to ensure the rule of law in new member states; political fragmentation among EU countries regarding the desirability of enlargement; as well as budgetary risks associated with the redistribution of financial resources. In addition, candidate countries face their own constraints, including weak institutions, corruption risks, and a deficit of integrated human capital.

Thus, the European Union finds itself in a situation of strategic contradiction: external challenges necessitate accelerated enlargement, while internal limitations-both within the Union and in candidate countries-systematically slow down this process. This indicates the need to rethink the very model of European integration, not through the creation of entirely new accession mechanisms (which would only increase bureaucratic burden and further slow procedures), but through the reform of existing frameworks.

Limitations of the Current Accession Model: The Case of Ukraine

The current model of European Union enlargement is based on a linear approach of "full membership": a candidate country is required to fulfill all acquis communautaire criteria across 35 negotiating chapters, after which the accession decision is adopted unanimously by all member states. In practice, this creates a prolonged and politically vulnerable process.

From my perspective, it is essential to examine the process itself and its shortcomings through the case of Ukraine, as between 2014 and 2026 the

country's European integration trajectory has reached a stage that allows for meaningful analysis.

Since 2014, Ukraine has undergone significant formal progress toward European integration; however, this progress has been uneven and partly declarative. According to assessments by the European Commission within the annual Enlargement Package, the average level of acquis implementation across key sectors ranges between 30-60%, depending on the area. The most substantial progress can be observed in digital transformation and energy synchronization, while the judicial system and anti-corruption infrastructure remain structurally problematic.

For instance, integration into the EU energy market following synchronization with ENTSO-E in 2022 represents a technical breakthrough. However, in practice, this integration remains partial and asymmetric, as Ukraine is connected to the European grid but does not have full access to mechanisms of strategic market governance, pricing, and reserve capacities. Ultimately, this creates a situation of "technical integration without institutional inclusion."

In the area of rule of law and anti-corruption policy, the situation is even more complex. Despite the establishment of NABU, SAPO, and the High Anti-Corruption Court, international indices, including the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, indicate that Ukraine remains in the lower tier of European rankings, reflecting the limited effectiveness of institutional transplantation of EU models.

At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge the structural constraints within the European Union itself that generate barriers to effective integration of candidate countries. A central feature of the EU's institutional architecture is the principle of unanimity in key policy areas, including foreign policy and enlargement. The veto right, which historically ensured balance among member states, increasingly functions as a mechanism for blocking decisions. As a result, even when a majority of member states support enlargement, the process can be delayed or halted by individual political actors, reducing the predictability and stability of EU policy.

In addition, there is a direct relationship between the number of member states and the complexity of governance: the larger the Union becomes, the higher the coordination costs and the slower the decision-making process. Thus, enlargement, which is theoretically intended to strengthen the EU, simultaneously complicates its internal functionality. This creates a structural

dilemma between the scale of integration and the efficiency of governance. Moreover, the accession of new members can alter the financial balance within the Union, potentially transforming current net recipients into contributors, as they would be required to support the integration of economies with lower levels of development.

As previously noted, this dynamic unfolds in parallel with geopolitical pressure on the EU, which effectively leaves little choice regarding further

enlargement. However, internal systemic constraints continue to slow down and shape the effectiveness of the accession process. Therefore, the current model of European integration can be reduced to four key structural problems:

Proposal

Taking into account the previously identified structural factors that slow down the EU enlargement process, I propose a concrete institutional mechanism for its transformation. The theme of this year's EPIS Policy Competition – "EU Enlargement: Bigger or Better" – however, in my view, presents a false dichotomy under current geopolitical and institutional conditions. The European Union cannot become "bigger" without simultaneously rethinking the very architecture of its enlargement process. Conversely, improving the efficiency and institutional quality of the enlargement system is a prerequisite for its expansion.

Thus, the core issue is not a choice between size and quality, but the absence of an integrated model that combines both dimensions. The proposed approach is based on the premise that the effectiveness and speed of institutional reform are fundamental conditions for further EU enlargement in the contemporary geopolitical context.

For this reason, recognizing the critical importance of establishing a structured and phased process, I propose the following practical measures capable of directly influencing the process of European integration: a transition from the model of "full membership through a linear process" to a model of phased sectoral integration; parallel institutional inclusion of candidate countries into joint governance mechanisms; and the creation of systems for accelerated development of human and institutional capacity. This approach can be operationalized as follows:

The case of Ukraine's EU integration process demonstrates that the current model of accession to the European Union, based on the principle of full and one-stage membership, is insufficiently effective both in terms of the pace of integration and the practical implementation of necessary reforms. The linear logic of "full compliance first – membership afterwards" creates an excessively long, politically vulnerable, and uneven process in which progress in individual sectors does not translate into real institutional integration.

The proposed model of sectoral integration redefines this architecture and introduces a step-by-step, functionally differentiated mechanism of a state's entry into the EU. Instead of full membership as a single final stage, integration is carried out through separate policy sectors – for example energy, judicial system, digital transformation, internal market, transport infrastructure, and others. For each candidate country, priority sectors are defined in advance based on a technical audit and an assessment of strategic relevance for integration.

Each sector functions as a separate level of integration with a clearly defined set of rights, obligations, and access to relevant EU mechanisms.

Progression to each subsequent stage is possible only upon achieving predefined performance indicators (KPIs), which ensures a shift from political declarativity to measurable effectiveness. In this way, the model eliminates the problem of "linear accession", replacing it with a modular integration system in which progress is cumulative but not exclusively dependent on a final political decision on membership.

In parallel with the sectoral approach, a gradual institutional integration framework is proposed. This concerns not only compliance with requirements, but also the creation of shared governance mechanisms within individual sectors. Each stage of integration includes not only a monitoring dimension, but also elements of participation – ranging from joint policy formulation to the involvement of representatives of candidate countries in sector-specific EU institutional structures.

Thus, integration is transformed from a one-sided process of "compliance" into a two-sided process of gradual institutional inclusion, where EU enlargement occurs simultaneously with a deepening of governance cooperation.

Mechanisms for Accelerated Training of Human and Institutional Capital

However, it should be noted that even under the implementation of a sectoral integration model, the key problem remains unresolved: a deficit of human capital capable of ensuring the real implementation of reforms. The case of Ukraine is illustrative: since 2014, the state has taken real steps toward European integration, but its system is still in an openly unprepared state, and this fact demonstrates that formal approximation of legislation to EU standards is not a guarantee of effective implementation, as state institutions often do not have a sufficient number of trained personnel, while existing management practices remain inertial and vulnerable to corruption.

In this regard, I propose the introduction of a parallel mechanism, namely targeted sectoral programs for the training and selection of personnel, directly linked to integration directions. In practical terms, this mechanism will have a clear and specific implementation structure and will be divided into concrete stages:

At the initial stage, the EU jointly with the government of the candidate country conducts a technical audit, within which priority integration sectors for the next cycle (for example, 3 or 4 years) are identified. In the case of Ukraine, these may include, in particular, the judicial system, anti-corruption policy, energy regulation, and public administration. For each sector, a quantitative need for specialists is determined (for example: 2-3 thousand personnel in the judicial sector, 1-2 thousand in regulatory policy, etc.).

Based on this audit, an annual intake of participants will be launched – approximately 5,000 or 10,000 individuals per year for a large candidate country. The key distinction is that the program is geographically and functionally limited: it is directed exclusively at candidate countries and tailored to specific sectors.

The selection process is carried out through a multi-level system:

Training programs are not designed as general university-type courses, but as applied preparation for specific functions.

For example:

Training takes place in a blended format (EU institutions as well as national schools of governance of member states) and lasts 6–18 months.

The key difference from existing programs is a strict return requirement. Participants sign an obligation to work in their home country for a defined period (for example, 3–5 years).

And in parallel, a joint EU + candidate country mechanism is created:

In other words, participants effectively obtain a semi-formalized status of an "integration human capital reserve", which increases their competitiveness in the public sector and provides a real opportunity to occupy positions in specific sectors and contribute to state reconstruction.

After returning, participants are not left outside the system. They work within specific reform areas and are evaluated based on clear indicators:

In case of non-compliance with the conditions, sanctions may be applied (loss of status, financial obligations). Thus, the proposed system creates a closed cycle: selection, training, return, integration, control. Its fundamental difference from existing programs lies in three elements:

As a result, the key gap of the current European integration process is eliminated – the gap between the formal adoption of EU norms and the actual capacity of the state to implement them. Thus, the proposed approach creates institutional conditions for a significant acceleration of the EU integration process, primarily through the concentration of resources and political attention on clearly defined sectors with established timeframes, as well as the creation of mechanisms for monitoring and implementing necessary reforms. This allows the avoidance of fragmentation of efforts across all areas of public administration and ensures the achievement of measurable results in priority reform areas.

Potential challenges and limitations

Despite the institutional logic of the proposed model, its implementation will inevitably be accompanied by a number of political and structural challenges that require separate regulation.

One of the key obstacles remains the principle of unanimity in the field of enlargement, which allows individual member states to block or significantly slow down the process. Within the proposed model, there is no immediate call for the abolition of the veto right; however, its functional limitation within the framework of sectoral integration is envisaged.

In particular, progression between sectoral stages may be based on qualified majority voting or a technical assessment by the European Commission, which reduces the level of politicization of the process without directly disrupting the existing balance of powers.

There is a risk that the "partial integration" model could be perceived negatively as a delay in full membership. In Ukraine's case, this is a partic-

ularly sensitive issue given the high social cost of the European integration process.

To mitigate this risk, the sectoral model must be accompanied by a clear system of interim outcomes: each stage of integration must provide tangible institutional and economic benefits (market access, participation in sectoral decision-making, financial instruments). This transforms the process from "awaiting membership" to "gradual acquisition of membership."

The proposed human capital development mechanism may become an object of political influence by national elites seeking to use it for their own interests. In other words, representatives of the state (for example, members of parliament) may perceive that, after completing the training program, they could obtain human capital in the form of their own children or relatives, who could then be placed in relevant public sectors through simplified employment procedures following the completion of the educational program.

Therefore, in light of these potential challenges and obstacles, I propose the introduction of an enhanced control system:

This makes it possible to minimize the risk of concentrating opportunities within narrow elite groups.

country or will not be integrated into the public sector.

To address this, the following measures are envisaged:

In this way, investments in human capital development are directly converted into the state's capacity to implement reforms.

Summary of the problems addressed by the proposed model

Sectoral integration combined with the human capital training mechanism provides a systemic response to the key limitations of the current EU enlargement process:

Conclusion

In conclusion, the European Union has reached a point where delaying enlargement can no longer be considered a neutral option, but rather a strategic risk. External geopolitical challenges require the Union to scale up, while internal institutional constraints prevent this within the current model without a loss of effectiveness. This is why the "Bigger or Better" dilemma is fundamentally misleading: the EU cannot become bigger without becoming more institutionally effective at the same time.

The proposed model of sectoral integration, combined with an institutionally embedded mechanism for human capital formation, offers not a compromise but a solution. It transforms enlargement from a politically vulnerable one-off act into a managed, phased process in which each step is accompanied by real institutional change and measurable outcomes. At the same time, it addresses the key weakness of European integration – the gap between formal adoption of norms and the capacity to implement them – through a structured system of training and integration of personnel directly embedded in the reform process.

Thus, enlargement ceases to be a political gesture or a postponed decision and becomes an instrument for strengthening the European Union itself. The EU gains not only new territories or markets, but an integrated capacity to act – institutionally, economically, and politically.

If the European Union seeks to preserve and strengthen its agency in the new geopolitical reality, it must abandon the inertia of waiting and move toward a logic of managed integration. Not choosing between scale and effectiveness, but ensuring both simultaneously. This is the strategic necessity and practical value of the proposed approach.

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