The 2026 EU Enlargement Reform Proposals and the Commission's Role

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Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, EU enlargement has transformed from a slow, administrative process into a geopolitical imperative. Candidate status was granted to countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, and candidate pathways accelerated across the Western Balkans, already drafting the accession treaty for Montenegro as a frontrunner candidate state. At the same time, lessons from past enlargement rounds and the cases of democratic backsliding within current member states have made capitals far more cautious, reinforcing the need for a controlled and secure expansion. Navigating these competing dynamics, the European Commission is working to preserve its central role in shaping enlargement policy. This policy brief first explores the preconditions for enlargement reform, compares various proposed approaches, and examines how the

European Commission – ahead of the October leaders' summit – attempts to balance geopolitical momentum for candidate states with stricter conditionality demanded by member states, while asserting its role as a central supranational actor.

Why is the enlargement policy reform necessary?

The necessity for enlargement policy reform stems from two main factors: first, the EU's negative experience with democratic backsliding in certain member states, which must be prevented from happening again; and second, the increase in member states, which will likely undermine the effectiveness of current decision-making and institutional systems.

In order to absorb new members without causing institutional breakdown, the EU must overhaul its decision-making, institutional, and financial structures. Under current treaties (Article 31(1) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)), key decisions in areas such as foreign policy and sanctions require absolute unanimity among all member states. In light of this, individual member states have repeatedly used their veto power for national leverage to delay or block critical decisions. One of the most prominent examples is Hungary under Viktor Orbán, which has repeatedly blocked Ukraine-related decisions regarding EU integration, military and financial assistance, and sanction packages against Russia (Rankin, 2026). Hence, if unanimity is already difficult to achieve with 27 members, maintaining it with 30 to 35 members creates constant vulnerability to paralysis.

Moreover, accepting new members – most of which face significant economic and democratic gaps compared to current member states – requires a fundamental restructuring of how the EU funds itself and addresses rule of law breaches. For instance, Ukraine's large agricultural capacity causes concern for member states, as it could flood existing EU markets and depress domestic prices (Bekamp & Wijffelaars, 2026). Furthermore, new members would become net recipients of massive development funds, which would reduce allocations for current beneficiaries or turn them into net contributors. This shift necessitates expanding these funds in the first place. Last but not least, cases of democratic backsliding in certain member states have shown that current treaties lack fast, effective mechanisms to enforce democratic standards (Lequesne & Wang, 2026). Activating the preventive mechanism of Article 7 TEU in Hungary and Poland led to years of hearings and political pressure, but yielded no substantial democratic progress. Hence, the accession treaty reform aims to streamline enforcement mechanisms for non-compliant states before admitting new members.

Member state proposals for enlargement reform

Although existing ideas for enlargement reform have not yet been formalised, member states have actively put forward various initiatives since

the beginning of this year – ranging from official non-papers to informal political proposals.

Based on a proposal issued this June, five out of six EU founding members have called for urgent and necessary reforms to future accession treaties, advocating for embedded safeguards to minimise the impact of potential democratic backsliding (Euronews, 2026c). The goal of the proposal is to maintain leverage over new member states years after accession by strengthening the "non-regression clause". To achieve this, the paper suggests penalties, such as freezing EU funds and suspending voting and veto rights, as well as lowering the voting threshold to a 4/5 majority for vote restriction. Additionally, it proposes extending transitional periods to ensure a smoother integration of new members into EU agriculture and labour mobility frameworks.

Unlike the above-mentioned proposal, which focuses primarily on the security of existing members and raises concerns about the fairness of granting partial membership powers, France and Germany have introduced a more balanced alternative. Paris and Berlin are pushing for a "gradual integration" plan, which operates on a "building block" approach (Barigazzi & Wax, 2023). This initiative ensures a candidate state gains gradual access to the benefits of EU membership prior to final accession, while providing additional safeguards for the EU. More concretely, successful advancement through tailored milestones would grant a candidate country full access to the European Single Market and the European Economic Area (EEA), as well as observer status in EU institutions, close cooperation, and informal participation in parliamentary committees and Commission meetings. Most importantly, the proposal aims to streamline the enlargement process by empowering the Commission to open negotiating clusters based on reform progress rather than requiring a unanimous vote from member states. On the other hand, the Union maintains safeguards by reserving the right to reverse progress through these stages if a candidate country regresses on key requirements (Euronews, 2026b).

Finally, Friedrich Merz has proposed granting Ukraine an "associate EU membership" as a temporary stepping stone to overcome the political and legal delays of full accession (Euronews, 2026a). Under this precedential proposal, Ukraine would gain access to major EU decision-making bodies without voting rights, participate in EU-funded programs, and receive vital security guarantees under Article 42.7 to request aid if attacked by Russia. To protect standard integration procedures, the plan includes a "snap-back mechanism" to freeze associate status if Ukraine backtracks on the rule of law or structural reforms, while ensuring that formal full membership remains the ultimate goal.

The Commission's role

Amidst the various proposals from the European capitals, the European Commission should leverage its position to navigate these inputs and find a balanced middle ground. In doing so, it should seek to advance an inclusive position – one that accommodates the internal security and political interests of member states while reinforcing the EU's broader strategic rationale for enlargement in candidate countries.

One of the concerns expressed by the Commission is ensuring that Montenegro's accession process does not stall despite the planned enlargement reforms, given that the candidate country has been successful in advancing its negotiations (Euronews, 2026d). The same applies to other candidate countries, as the EU must avoid giving the impression that their progress is going unrecognised or that its accession commitments are being unfulfilled. Furthermore, the Commission must anticipate future political and constitutional hurdles within member states. In France, for instance, ratifying future EU enlargements requires either a public referendum or a three-fifths parliamentary majority (Macek, 2025). Given the rising popularity of the eurosceptic Rassemblement National (RN) party and broader societal scepticism toward enlargement, this constitutional requirement poses a significant barrier to admitting new members. Ultimately, these external credibility risks and internal domestic barriers highlight why the Commission must act swiftly and assume a guiding role in steering the enlargement process.

Ahead of the October leaders' summit in Brussels, the Commission is preparing its own enlargement reform proposal. European Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos has already taken a clear stance on specific aspects of the issue, offering a signal of the direction the Commission will take. Commissioner Kos directly rejected the idea of restricting voting rights for new member states, arguing it undermines a foundational EU principle: the equality of all member states (Tomlyová & Bilčík, 2026). Furthermore, she criticised the binary, "all-or-nothing" approach to integration, advocating instead for gradual and sectoral integration prior to full accession (EU Debates, 2026). However, she emphasised that this process must go hand-in-hand with strict adherence to core EU principles, including the rule of law, anti-corruption, and judicial independence (European Western Balkans, 2026). Hence, we can anticipate that the Commission will push for a more flexible accession process – one that strengthens candidates' incentives through smaller milestones while granting the EU greater leverage and oversight to assess progress step-by-step. However, a stricter approach involving the revocation of core membership powers remains less likely.

Power contestation between the European Commission and member states remains a central theme in EU governance. Whether the Commission's upcoming enlargement initiatives will be embraced by member states or perceived as an institutional power grab remains to be seen.

Historically, however, the Commission has successfully asserted its own strategic agenda. In the context of enlargement, a policy area defined by the tension between national political priorities and the Union's broader geopolitical objectives, the Commission must once again forge a balanced framework that aligns supranational ambition with member state consensus.

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