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The question of whether the EU should prioritize enlargement or institutional deepening presents what appears to be a fundamental trade-off. However, this framing obscures the actual challenge: the EU's current decision-making structures cannot accommodate further enlargement without comprehensive reform. Both objectives are necessary, but current governance mechanisms make achieving either increasingly difficult.

Consider the empirical evidence. Montenegro initiated accession negotiations in 2012 and remains in the process fourteen years later. Ukraine submitted its application in 2022, with projected admission timelines extending to the mid-2040s. Meanwhile, individual member states have blocked critical foreign policy decisions on multiple occasions, demonstrating that unanimity requirements create systematic obstacles to collective action. The historical record provides instructive precedents. Greece's admission to the Eurozone in 2001, despite subsequently revealed statistical irregularities, contributed to the sovereign debt crisis requiring €289 billion in financial assistance. Conversely, the 2004 enlargement, which involved rigorous preparation and verification, successfully integrated ten Central and Eastern European states. These cases suggest that the quality of institutional preparation, rather than the speed of expansion, determines enlargement success.

This proposal addresses both imperatives through institutional reform that enables rapid yet standards based enlargement.

The proposed model establishes differentiated decision-making authority based on objective capacity criteria while preserving universal legislative participation.

Permanent Member Designation:

Permanent status requires satisfaction of five measurable criteria:

Applying these standards identifies five qualifying states: Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands. These countries collectively represent 71% of EU economic output and provide 90% of net budgetary contributions. Permanent designation remains conditional members failing

to maintain qualifying criteria (particularly Eurozone participation or democratic standards) lose this status.

Rotating Member Participation:

Non-permanent members participate through ten rotating Council seats with three-year terms, allocated proportionally across geographic regions. This ensures all member states exercise strategic decision- making authority on a regular cyclical basis. The average frequency of participation ranges from six to nine years depending on regional membership numbers.

Functional Authority Distribution:

Permanent Members exercise exclusive authority over four strategic domains, with decisions requiring four-fifths approval:

All remaining policy areas representing approximately 90% of EU legislative activity continue under existing procedures requiring full Council participation through ordinary legislative procedures. The European Parliament retains all current competencies, ensuring direct citizen representation remains unchanged.

This distribution addresses a fundamental issue in current practice: strategic decision-making authority is already concentrated through informal Franco-German coordination, but operates without transparency or broader participation. The Directorate formalizes existing practice while expanding participation beyond bilateral arrangements.

The proposed framework resolves several persistent obstacles to effective enlargement:

Procedural Efficiency:

This procedural change significantly compresses timelines. Analysis suggests Ukraine could complete the accession process by 2032 rather than projected timelines extending past 2045 a reduction of 13-15 years while maintaining identical substantive requirements.

Standards Enforcement:

The Greek precedent demonstrates the risks of politically-motivated admission without rigorous verification. The proposal addresses this through mandatory independent assessment mechanisms. Candidate state statistics would undergo International Monetary Fund verification, judicial independence would require Venice Commission certification, and governance indicators would be measured by

established international organizations. This removes the political pressures that can compromise assessment quality in large intergovernmental negotiations.

Institutional Scalability:

The European Council currently operates with 27 participants, making substantive deliberation increasingly difficult. Expanding to 35+ members without structural reform would likely render strategic coordination impossible. The Strategic Council of fifteen members (five Permanent plus ten Rotating) maintains deliberative capacity while ensuring broader representation than current informal bilateral arrangements.

The primary objection to differentiated decision-making authority concerns the principle of sovereign equality among member states. However, this critique requires examination of both formal structures and practical realities.

Current arrangements feature significant de facto inequality despite formal parity. Germany's economic policies substantially influence eurozone monetary conditions regardless of smaller member preferences. Major EU initiatives typically originate from Franco-German bilateral consultations. The Eurozone itself represents differentiated integration, with twenty members participating while seven remain outside this core policy framework. The Directorate proposal makes existing power relationships transparent and accountable rather than informal and obscured. Importantly, rotating membership ensures all states regularly participate in strategic decisions, providing genuine episodic influence rather than theoretical veto capacity that smaller states cannot practically exercise without risking significant economic consequences.

Legislative authority remains fully democratic. All member states participate equally in ordinary legislative procedures, the European Parliament represents all EU citizens proportionally, and only strategic framework decisions—foreign policy, enlargement, budget frameworks—operate under Permanent Member authority.

Treaty amendment typically requires unanimous member state ratification, presenting an apparent procedural obstacle. The proposal employs a two-tier ratification mechanism to address this challenge:

Tier One: All five Permanent Members must ratify, reflecting their acceptance of enhanced responsibility.

Tier Two: Non-permanent members require two-thirds majority ratification (15 of 22 current members), preventing individual state veto capacity.

This approach draws on existing treaty provisions. Article 48 TEU permits simplified revision procedures for specific treaty provisions, while Article 20 TEU enables enhanced cooperation among willing member states. Legal analysis confirms compatibility with current treaty frameworks.

Projected Timeline:

2027: Intergovernmental Conference concludes Directorate Treaty negotiations 2027-2028: Two-tier ratification process

2028: New framework becomes operational; initial rotating members selected

2029-2033: Western Balkan states complete accession (Montenegro, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina)

2035: Ukraine and Moldova complete accession following post-conflict reconstruction and institutional development

This timeline represents a substantial acceleration compared to current projections while maintaining rigorous Copenhagen Criteria application.

The question of "bigger or better" presents a false dichotomy. The EU requires both geographic expansion to fulfill its foundational mission

of European integration and institutional effectiveness to function as a capable international actor. These objectives are not contradictory but complementary effective institutions enable sustainable enlargement.

The Directorate model acknowledges existing power asymmetries while creating transparent, accountable structures that provide universal participation through rotation and maintain full democratic legitimacy through preserved legislative equality. It addresses the fundamental challenge that unanimous decision- making becomes increasingly impractical as membership expands, while avoiding the paralysis that threatens the EU's capacity to respond to pressing geopolitical challenges. The alternative to institutional reform is not preservation of theoretical sovereign equality but rather continued informal concentration of decision-making authority without accountability or broader participation. The choice is between transparent, structured power-sharing that enables effective action and fictional parity that obscures existing hierarchies while preventing collective decisions.

European integration has always evolved through pragmatic responses to concrete challenges rather than adherence to abstract principles. The current moment requires such pragmatism: institutional structures that reflect capacity, enable decisions, and maintain democratic legitimacy. The Directorate provides this framework.