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Empowering the Geopolitical EU

in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans

DELIVERABLE

D 2.5

Reforming EU Enlargement Governance and Advancing a Principled Gradual Integration: A Three-Track Decision-Making Model and Priority Accession Reforms

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DELIVERABLE FACT SHEET - PUBLIC

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BACKGROUND

About GEO-POWER-EU

GEO-POWER-EU aims to empower the EU to manage security threats in its Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans amidst a deteriorating geopolitical environment. The project's primary ambition is to surpass current standards and develop a comprehensive EU strategy for these regions, utilizing new and reformed policy instruments while considering the strategic ambitions of other geopolitical actors.

To achieve this, GEO-POWER-EU's work plan is built on six specific objectives: proposing adaptations to the EU Enlargement policy to reflect new realities; examining the relevance of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and providing policy recommendations for its reform; assessing the influence of other geopolitical actors, including the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey, in these regions; offering strategic foresight on the prospects of geopolitical competition in these areas; exploring ways to enhance the EU's ability to contain military threats from beyond its borders; and proposing a comprehensive, multidimensional EU strategy to guide relations with Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries.

The project's research aims to advance beyond the current state of the art by developing a new conceptual and policy framework using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Methodologically, GEO-POWER-EU leverages cutting-edge expertise from various disciplines, implementing a multi-stage plan grounded in a participatory and inclusive approach. This approach involves systematic engagement of researchers from third institutions, decision-makers, stakeholders, and citizens—including those from the regions under analysis—throughout the project cycle. …

More about the project: **geo-power.eu**

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CONSORTIUM

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Glossary, Abbreviations and Acronyms

ASAP	Act in Support of Ammunition Production
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CATI	Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing
CBAM	Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EC	European Commission
EDA	European Defence Agency
EDF	European Defence Fund
EDIP	European Defence Industry Programme
EDIRPA	European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act
EESC	European Economic and Social Committee
EPF	European Peace Facility
EPRS	European Parliamentary Research Service
EU27	The 27 member states of the European Union
EUCO	European Council (Council document series prefix)
EUMAM	European Union Military Assistance Mission (in support of Ukraine)
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FSB	Federal Security Service (Russia)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IEA	International Energy Agency
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
JHA	Justice and Home Affairs
MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
QMV	Qualified Majority Voting
RQMV	Reversed Qualified Majority Voting
SAFE	Security Action for Europe
SDPs	Security and Defence Partnerships

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SEPA	Single Euro Payments Area
SPAK	Special Structure Against Corruption (Albania)
TEU	Treaty on European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VAT	Value Added Tax
WB	Western Balkans
WB6	Western Balkans Six

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Executive Summary

The EU decided in 2022 to reinvigorate its enlargement policy and decisively advance the integration of candidate countries. Yet, despite unanimous agreement on the need to eliminate "grey zones" in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, the practical execution of enlargement remains paralysed by institutional friction, procedural misuse, and conceptual ambiguities surrounding "gradual integration". Based on two years of research—including 109 elite interviews, 20 focus groups, and a survey of 9,011 citizens across nine candidate countries—this report sets out three concrete reforms to reinvigorate EU enlargement policy and create a credible, merit-based path to full membership.

The Three-Track Decision-Making Model

The primary cause of unpredictability in accession negotiations is the Council's routine use of unanimity at every procedural step. Member states have regularly exploited these veto points to block progress over bilateral disputes unrelated to the actual acquis. Yet, given that unanimity across intermediate accession steps remains a routine institutional practice, anchored solely in candidate-specific Negotiating Frameworks, the Council can reform these procedural rules by unanimous decision without triggering a Treaty amendment.

Instead of remaining deadlocked in unending talks over a uniform shift to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) across all intermediate stages of accession negotiations that sceptical member states firmly reject, the Council should adopt a three-track decision-making system across different themes (i.e., Clusters and Chapters):

- **Constitutional-Sovereignty Track:** It comprises Cluster 1 (Fundamentals), Cluster 6 (External Relations), Chapter 34 (Institutions), and Chapter 35 (Other Issues), covering policy areas where the Council’s role is to exercise political discretion on issues of constitutional, foreign policy, or member-state sensitivity. In this track, the Council could use Reinforced QMV (72% of member states representing 65% of the population), supplemented by an Emergency Brake mechanism. If a member state opposes adopting a decision for vital and stated reasons of national policy, the matter would be referred to the European Council for a decision by consensus, preserving member states' right to defend vital national interests.
- **Accession Terms & Conditions Track:** It covers Cluster 5 (Resources, Agriculture, and Cohesion). On these issues, the Council enters into redistributive bargaining with candidate countries almost by default over net budgetary contributions, structural funding allocations, and

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transitional periods. The Council should decide at all intermediate stages of accession negotiations via Reinforced QMV, without the backing of an emergency brake, to seek a constructive compromise within finite Multiannual Financial Framework timelines.

- **Regulatory Alignment Track:** It covers Cluster 2 (Internal Market), Cluster 3 (Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth), and Cluster 4 (Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity). Here, the Council acts primarily as a technical evaluator of candidate country alignment with the acquis. In this track, decisions should be taken under Reversed Qualified Majority Voting, i.e., the Commission's recommendation will be deemed adopted unless the Council rejects it by QMV within 90 days. If a member state or candidate country requests a formal derogation from the immediate and full application of the acquis, an Interest Safeguard Clause will escalate the vote to Reinforced QMV, as previewed in the Accession Terms and Conditions Track.

Gradual Integration

To operationalise gradual integration, the EU must solve two puzzles. First, it must decide which membership benefits can be extended to candidate countries during the pre-accession period, taking into consideration legal constraints, the Union's internal governance needs, and the integrity of the Single Market. Second, the EU must also define the priority accession conditions that candidate countries must fulfil first. In other words, gradual integration is an approach that seeks to align urgently needed reforms with tangible intermediate rewards. This study identifies four domains that the EU should help candidate countries to address as a matter of priority: i) the rule of law, ii) defence and security policy, iii) economic convergence, and iv) energy transition.

On the **rule of law**, the Commission should order independent baseline reports to set out benchmarks against which progress can be measured and to provide targeted recommendations for priority actions. At the same time, the weight in accession negotiations of Chapter 5 on Public Procurement should be elevated to the level of Chapters 23 and 24. Candidate countries that meet verifiable rule-of-law benchmarks should then gain phased, conditional access to the EU Structural and Cohesion Funds. The EU should also provide more effective support to local authorities and civil society.

In the field of **Security and Defence Preparedness**, the EU should develop Convergence Roadmaps that address security sector governance, defence readiness in line with NATO standards, strategic alignment, and civil preparedness. Candidate countries demonstrating progress should be rewarded, initially, with the development of action plans for training and capability-building, closer ties with PESCO and the European Defence Agency. Later on, rewards should include observer access to CSDP formats, eligibility for EPF funding and joint procurement, and access to European defence supply chains.

To address the lack of **economic convergence and brain drain**, the EU should expedite accession negotiations where possible and grant candidate countries early access to EU funds and the single

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market. It must also help candidate countries shift away from the current low-tax, low-wage development models and pay greater attention to social, healthcare, and labour market reforms.

The EU should grant candidate countries phased access to climate and cohesion-scale funding to support the **energy transition**. Allocation for energy procurement, storage capacity, and grid expansion must be tied to anti-corruption benchmarks while safeguarding vulnerable households. Finally, existing financial instruments should be redirected to mitigate CBAM compliance costs for candidate states, alongside accelerated negotiations to align their energy rules more quickly with EU market standards.

A Principled Membership Framework

As discussions intensify over the design of future Accession Treaties, two alternative perspectives have emerged: offering candidate countries some form of associate status, or imposing restrictions on institutional representation and corresponding rights, thereby creating a system of second-class membership. Although alternative institutional options may be offered for partner countries or countries that have no accession perspective reflecting specific strategic priorities, in the case of membership the EU must reject institutional discrimination and adopt a Principled Membership Framework built on three non-negotiable pillars.

First, the EU must ensure **full legal equality**. New members should not face limits on their voting rights or institutional representation as a condition of joining. Where governance reforms are needed to prevent decision-making paralysis, they should apply across the board — not be dressed up as accession conditions aimed only at newcomers.

Second, the EU should use **temporary, time-limited and proportionate safeguards**. The EU should expand the traditional single-market and internal-security safeguard clauses to cover areas such as rule-of-law backsliding. Still, any such expansion needs a firm sunset clause built in. Without one, 'temporary' safeguards risk hardening into a permanent second-class membership status.

Third, the EU must keep **Ukraine's EU accession and security guarantees** on separate tracks**.** Ukraine's EU accession path should remain distinct from efforts to address its post-war security needs. The country's need for security commitments will be better handled through a dedicated, legally binding coalition agreement than by bending the standard accession framework to fit an unprecedented case.

To conclude, replacing unanimity in the intermediate stages of accession negotiations with the three-track model and prioritising key reforms linked to clear intermediate rewards under a gradual integration approach will revive momentum in EU enlargement. Crucially, the affirmation of the EU's commitment to a principled membership framework will transform accession from an uncertain promise into a credible perspective.

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Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 prompted the EU to acknowledge the geopolitical imperative of expanding into the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe to eliminate 'grey zones' in Europe. Moreover, the Union recognised the need to reinvigorate its enlargement policy to enhance its effectiveness. Notably, the EU has also adopted a 'gradual integration' approach towards candidate countries to incentivise reform efforts through tangible intermediate rewards and phased access to EU policies and institutions.

Member states have subsequently produced nearly a dozen non-papers outlining reform ideas, while think tanks have published numerous studies outlining actionable policy recommendations. Yet, little has changed in practice, with EU institutions and member states remaining divided over key strategic questions. For instance, although the European Council agreed in December 2023 that internal reform and enlargement should proceed in parallel, member states continue to differ over the scope, sequencing, and depth of reforms required before the next accession. Pending the reform of EU institutions, should the EU offer candidate countries alternative pathways short of full membership (e.g., associate status), or outline a path towards "gradual integration" – itself a contested term without a generally shared understanding? Should EU enlargement prioritise a specific region or certain countries, or should each candidate country advance strictly on its merits? If the enlargement policy is reformed, which parts of it should be reconsidered? At the time of writing, the Commission's pre-enlargement policy reviews are still pending, leaving several important questions unresolved regarding the implications of enlargement for EU policies, budget, and governance.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the debate on EU enlargement reform by offering answers to three pressing and largely interrelated questions. First, how can the EU increase the predictability, transparency and fairness of its conditionality during accession negotiations? Second, which priority challenges in candidate countries must be addressed, and how can the EU operationalise the gradual integration approach to support those countries' efforts to meet them? Finally, what should the EU offer candidate countries upon completion of the accession process, within the context of ongoing internal EU reforms?

Methodologically, this paper represents the culmination of a two-year collective research effort. We first conducted 109 semi-structured interviews to gather the views and ideas of key policy stakeholders in both the EU and (potential) candidate countries across the Western Balkans and

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Eastern Europe. We then conducted a public opinion survey (sample *N* = 9,011 across nine countries, using the CATI method), alongside 20 focus groups – each comprising 10–20 representatives of selected target groups – to gauge citizens' perceptions in the two regions under examination.

This paper is structured into four parts. The first section focuses on the uncertainty surrounding accession negotiations at all intermediate stages, from the granting of candidate status to the approval of the accession treaty. The study identifies the universal application of the unanimity rule in the Council as the main cause of unpredictability and lack of transparency in the process, and proposes a three-track decision-making model to overcome many of these hurdles. The second part briefly outlines four key challenges surrounding the integration of candidate countries: (1) consolidating the rule of law, (2) aligning with and contributing to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), (3) achieving economic convergence with the EU-27 and tackling brain drain, and (4) implementing the green energy transition. The study explains these challenges, underscores the risks and costs of persisting with a 'business-as-usual' approach, and articulates a series of policy recommendations to operationalise the gradual integration approach. The third part critically examines the discussion surrounding the *finalité* of accession negotiations (e.g., between full membership and alternative forms of associate membership) and outlines the principles that should guide EU enlargement policy. Finally, the fourth part summarises our policy recommendations.

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The Three-Track Decision-Making Model

Nikolaos Tzifakis (University of the Peloponnese)

EU and candidate-country stakeholders concurred in interviews that the prospects for EU enlargement appear uncertain. Notably, Western Balkan elites expressed their frustration over the stagnation of the process, which has persisted for over two decades (Manoli et al., 2025: 19-20). The accession path appears interminable, impairing the credibility of the membership offer.

To give the process new impetus, the European Council decided in June 2022 to advance the gradual integration of candidate countries (European Council, 2022: 5). The general idea behind the gradual approach is to link progress in reform implementation to tangible intermediate rewards such as greater economic assistance, integration into EU policies and the Single Market, and access to EU institutions. Although some candidate-country elites support the gradual integration approach, they caution that it should not serve as a substitute for full EU membership (Manoli et al., 2025: 38-39). In any case, while several interesting ideas have been advanced by both the think-tank community (e.g., Mihajlović et al. 2023) and member states (e.g., the Franco-German non-paper presented in June 2026), the EU has not yet developed a plan for operationalising gradual integration. More importantly, despite its merits, the gradual approach appears to be of little relevance to countries whose path to accession remains blocked by EU member states.

As stakeholders from both the EU and candidate countries highlighted during interviews, a major source of ambiguity is the Council's governance of the entire process under the unanimity rule (Manoli et al., 2025: 22). Member states exert control over every facet of the process, retaining numerous veto points to obstruct the accession path of candidate countries. Therefore, the pace of a candidate country's integration into EU structures often appears disconnected from its progress in implementing reforms.

The Treaties provide for the following decision-making rules: the Council decides on the application of a third country by unanimity after receiving the consent of the European Parliament by an absolute majority; the European Council agrees on the applicant's conditions of eligibility by consensus; and all member states sign and ratify the accession treaty in

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accordance with their respective constitutional provisions (see Article 49 TEU and Article 15(4) TEU). Yet, decision-making by unanimity at all intermediate stages along the accession path has become a routine institutional practice, formally inscribed only in the Negotiating Frameworks of candidate countries (e.g., Council of the European Union, 2022a; 2022b; 2024a; 2024b). These intermediate stages include: setting opening benchmarks for the six thematic clusters of negotiating chapters; opening accession negotiations in each cluster; articulating the Union's common positions; defining interim benchmarks for the Fundamentals cluster; determining closing benchmarks for individual chapters; and provisionally closing negotiations on each chapter.

In recent years, various ideas have been advanced to reform the Council's decision-making procedures for enlargement policy. For instance, while the Franco-German 'Working Group on EU Institutional Reform' (2023: 21) proposed that '[v]alidating each negotiation chapter' be decided by Qualified Majority Voting (QMV), the German-Slovenian non-paper (circulated in January 2024) recommended using QMV for the fulfilment of opening benchmarks and the opening of clusters. More ambitiously, Mihajlović et al. (2023: 17) suggested that the Council decide by QMV across all intermediate stages of accession negotiations. In addition, other studies (e.g., Nechev and Dimitrov, 2026: 5–8; Zweers et al., 2024: 7) have outlined options regarding not only the stages to which QMV would apply, but also the QMV thresholds themselves. These range from the standard QMV rule under Article 16(4) TEU (55% of Member States representing 65% of the EU population) to higher thresholds, such as a near-unanimity consensus that permits up to two or three dissenting Member States.

Invariably, all reform proposals aim to strike a balance between improving process efficiency and securing the consent of sceptical member states that want to retain the right to defend their perceived national interests. Whereas ambitious reforms (e.g., decisions by QMV at all intermediate stages) currently have little chance of getting unanimously approved by all member states, overly conservative changes will not make a real difference. Remarkably, notwithstanding their advantages, most reform proposals contain a central blind spot: while they explore alternative decision-making procedures that the Council may apply at different intermediate stages, they treat the thematic content of accession negotiations as a black box. Yet this is puzzling, given that the Council's institutional function is not uniform throughout the enlargement process. Undoubtedly, the Council plays a horizontal supervisory role in the process, adopting conclusions on the Commission's annual progress reports. It also sets the pace for the transition from one stage to the next. However, the Council's role in the sequence of accession negotiations varies by topic and issue. In most negotiation chapters, the Council's default task is to verify a candidate country's compliance with the acquis. In other cases, the

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Council's role involves redistributive bargaining over transitional periods, derogations, safeguard clauses, and budgetary provisions. Furthermore, in policy fields where the acquis is thin or non-existent (e.g., foreign policy), the Council's decisions reflect broader political judgments on a candidate country's accession. Crucially, the Council steers negotiations on how EU institutions will be reconfigured following enlargement, though the final institutional arrangements depend on European Parliament consent and full Member State ratification. At the risk of oversimplification, each Council decision during accession negotiations ultimately addresses one of four questions. To what extent has a candidate country aligned its domestic regulatory framework with the acquis? How should the EU manage the socio-economic impact — or the perceived political cost — of integrating a new member into its structures? On what political or geopolitical grounds is a country's accession acceptable to existing members? And how must EU institutions be reconfigured to integrate a new member without critically disrupting the existing balance of power? These questions are not equally salient in every chapter, nor do they arise in the same order. But taken together, they reveal that the Council's role in accession negotiations is not uniform — it shifts depending on the issues at stake. We therefore propose distinguishing Council decisions across three tracks: the **Constitutional-Sovereignty Track,** the **Accession Terms and Conditions Track**, and the **Regulatory Alignment Track**.

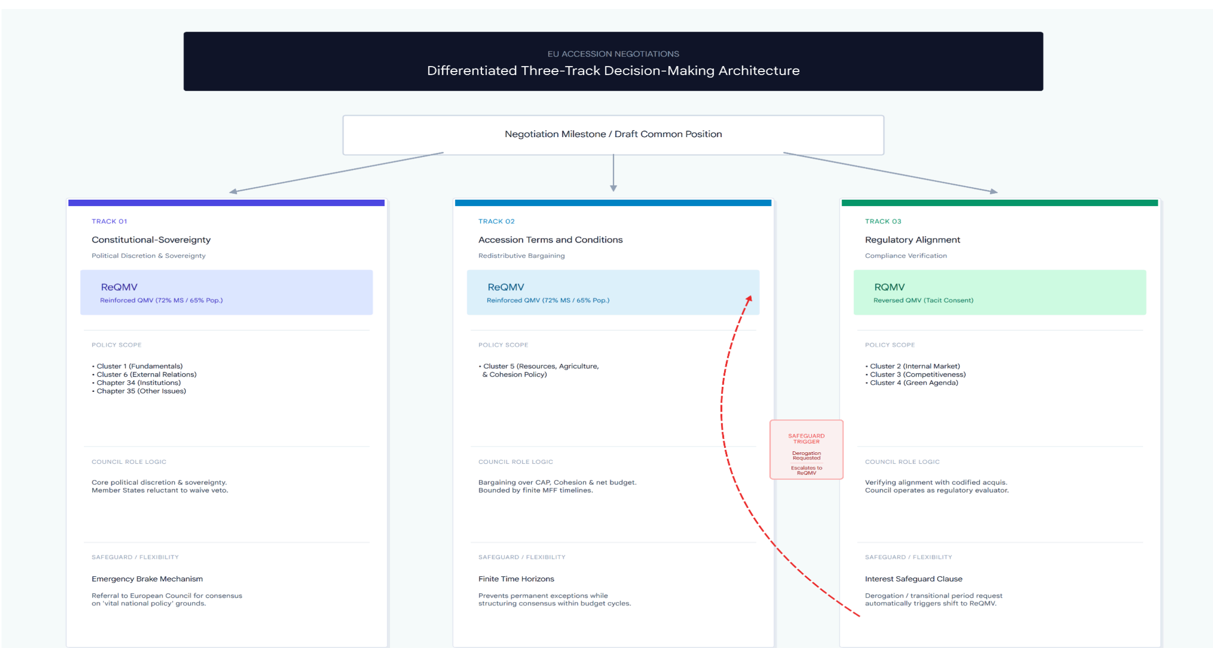

Figure 1: Three-Track Decision-Making Architecture for EU Accession Negotiations

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The **constitutional-sovereignty track** covers policy areas where the Council's role is to exercise political discretion on issues of constitutional, foreign policy, or member-state sensitivity. These policy areas comprise Cluster 1 (Fundamentals), Cluster 6 (External Relations), as well as Chapters 34 (Institutions) and 35 (Other Issues) which remain outside the thematic clusters. Past practice demonstrates that this track captures the core issues – the rule of law, minority rights, foreign policy, and bilateral disputes – in which member states most frequently exercise their veto power to defend vital national interests. Cluster 1 occupies a preeminent position throughout the accession process. According to the 2020 Revised Enlargement Methodology, procedural milestones in other clusters and chapters (e.g., opening and closing negotiations) are conditioned on satisfactory progress achieved in the Fundamentals Cluster (European Commission, 2020: 2-3). Moreover, while the chapters on external relations generated few concerns in previous rounds of enlargement, the EU's recent geopolitical turn has heightened the salience of full alignment with its foreign policy. In addition, Chapter 34 triggers important intra-Council negotiations by reconfiguring the composition of EU institutions, thereby affecting the relative power of individual member states. Lastly, Chapter 35 addresses key country-specific issues falling outside the acquis and the scope of the six Clusters, such as the resolution of bilateral disputes, the introduction of safeguard clauses, and the terms of post-accession monitoring (European Commission, 2003: 59-62; 2005: 25; 2011: 29-30). Seen in this light, the constitutional-sovereignty track addresses issues where several member states are reluctant to relinquish their veto power. Within this track, the Council could apply some form of **Reinforced QMV (ReQMV)**, supplemented by an **emergency brake** mechanism.

The Treaties set different thresholds for ReQMV in different circumstances (e.g., Articles 7 and 354 TEU, and Article 238(2) TFEU read in conjunction with Article 76 TFEU). A compelling ReQMV threshold is suggested by Zweers et al. (2024: 7): the decision-making procedure the Council follows when acting without a proposal from the Commission or the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. According to Article 238(2) TFEU, the Council decisions in such cases require the agreement of at least 72% of member states (i.e., 20 out of 27 countries), representing at least 65% of the EU population. Regarding the emergency brake, its function could be inspired — by analogy — by the mechanism described in Article 31(2) TEU on the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Specifically, if a member state opposes adopting a decision via ReQMV for 'vital and stated reasons of national policy', the matter would be referred to the European Council for a decision by consensus. Similar mechanisms exist in the field of judicial cooperation in criminal matters (e.g., Articles 82(3) and 83(3) TFEU). Therefore, in all questions involving vital and stated reasons of national policy

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arising in the constitutional-sovereignty track, member states would retain the practical certainty that no decision can proceed without their concerns being heard and resolved at the highest political level.

The **accession terms and conditions track** covers policy areas where, beyond checking alignment with the acquis, the Council has the additional task of entering, almost by default, into substantive talks with candidate countries over the distribution of the costs and benefits of enlargement through the negotiation of transitional periods, derogations, and budgetary provisions. This could include Cluster 5 (Resources, Agriculture, and Cohesion). As seen in previous rounds of enlargement, candidate countries' integration into the Common Agricultural Policy, their entitlements to Cohesion and Structural Funds, and their contributions to the EU budget have often been settled through difficult negotiations, first among member states and subsequently between the Council and candidate countries. For instance, negotiated settlements on agriculture and rural development routinely focus on the financial implications of enlargement. Key issues include phasing in EU direct payments, setting commodity reference quantities (such as base areas, quotas, and ceilings), allocating rural development funds, and establishing transition periods for full compliance with the acquis (European Commission, 2003: 16-23; 2005: 8-10; 2011; 10-11). Regarding regional and structural policy, accession negotiations focus on the level of funding allocated to new member states and their eligibility for financial support under the Structural Funds' core objectives (European Commission, 2003: 42-45; 2005: 16; 2011: 17-18). And negotiations on financial and budgetary provisions concern the basis for calculating a new member state's contribution to the EU budget as well as its entitlement to EU financial allocations (European Commission, 2003: 56; 2005: 22; 2011: 25). On these issues, while member states actively promote their national preferences, they know that all relevant Council decisions have finite time horizons (e.g., the next Multiannual Financial Framework). Accession negotiations are generally not designed to produce permanent exceptions. Even if the EU compels a candidate country to accept an unfavourable settlement, the latter will most likely seek to reverse it once it becomes a member state, as previous cases (e.g., the UK and Spain) demonstrate (Ruano, 2002: 28-29). The Council's decision-making procedure in this track should accordingly allow member states to defend their interests and foster consensus-building, without paralysing accession negotiations. In our view, the Council could reach decisions on the accession terms and conditions track via some form of ReQMV, as discussed earlier, though this time without the backing of an emergency brake.

The **regulatory alignment track** covers policy areas where EU legislation is extensive and largely codified, leaving relatively little room for discretion. It may involve Cluster 2 (Internal Market), Cluster 3 (Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth), and Cluster 4 (Green Agenda and Sustainable

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Connectivity). In these clusters, the Council's primary task is to verify whether a candidate country's domestic framework meets the requirements. Although compliance with certain parts of the acquis in these clusters remains subject to interpretation, the Council routinely acts more as a regulatory evaluator (deciding on the Commission's recommendations) than as a negotiator with candidate countries. Verifying alignment with pre-established EU rules has generally been less contentious than bargaining over transitional or politically sensitive issues. Indeed, the EU commenced verifying compliance with the acquis in the 1990s, with a view to the 2004 enlargement (Mayhew, 2000: 10). Until then, the EU operated on the premise that if a new member state did not properly implement EU legislation, it would be compelled to do so by the Court of Justice of the European Union. In this track, the Council could thus conduct its conformity checks across Clusters 2–4 by deciding on all intermediate stages in accession negotiations via **Reversed Qualified Majority Voting (RQMV)**. Under this rule, the Commission's recommendation is deemed adopted unless the Council, acting by QMV, decides within 90 days to reject it. This decision-making procedure, which presumes tacit Council adoption, was already incorporated into EU enlargement policy under the 2020 Revised Methodology (European Commission, 2020: 6) and elaborated further in candidate country Negotiating Frameworks, where the 90-day window was set (e.g., Council of the European Union, 2022a: 13; 2024a: 13). However, its use is currently reserved for cases where candidate countries backslide on reform implementation. Therefore, we propose extending it to all decisions at intermediate stages of accession negotiations in the regulatory alignment track.

Substantive negotiations are not confined to the chapters in Cluster 5. For instance, during the 2004 enlargement, the EU and the candidate countries agreed on 322 transitional measures across 17 of the 31 accession chapters (Avery, 2004: 56). Considering the volume of the acquis (over 80,000 pages) and the magnitude of the task (the accession of ten countries), the number of time-limited deviations from standard membership rights and obligations was relatively modest (Schneider, 2009: 21). Still, whether requested by the EU (e.g., on the free movement of workers) or by candidate countries (e.g., on environmental policy, taxation, and competition policy), transitional arrangements were also negotiated on chapters currently falling within Clusters 2, 3, and 4. When this occurs, the Council's role shifts: it is no longer simply checking compliance but also hammering out the specific terms of a candidate country's integration. Our model addresses these cases by building an **interest safeguard clause** into the regulatory alignment track. If a Draft Common Position prepared by the Commission or a Council decision to provisionally close a chapter under Clusters 2–4 contains any provision deviating from the immediate and full application of the acquis—whether requested by the candidate country or

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demanded by member states—both the adoption of the EU Common Position and the provisional closure of the chapter shall **require ReQMV**.

Although Clusters 2–4 can generate many requests for transitional arrangements, they remain conceptually distinct from Cluster 5. Negotiations in Cluster 5 focus primarily on financial allocations and country-specific parameters that are not predetermined by the acquis, thereby entailing bargaining over the net costs and benefits of enlargement. By contrast, requests for transitional arrangements in Clusters 2–4 usually pertain to the adaptation of candidate countries to codified EU rules. The latter fall within the purview of the non-negotiable acquis and chiefly concern the agreement on limited, time-specific transition periods. For instance, in negotiations on competition policy (grouped under Cluster 2 in the revised methodology), candidate countries in past enlargement rounds requested deadline extensions for phasing out state aid to national companies that was incompatible with the acquis (European Commission, 2003: 13-14; 2005: 7; 2011: 9-10). Similarly, in talks on taxation (now located in Cluster 3), candidates requested transitional arrangements for compliance with the acquis on VAT and excise duties (European Commission, 2003: 30-31; 2005: 12-13; 2011: 15). As for negotiations on the environment (currently placed under Cluster 4), candidate countries requested transitional periods to conform with the acquis, where substantial investments were required to modernize their infrastructure (e.g., wastewater treatment, waste management, and large combustor plant emissions) (European Commission, 2003: 46-49; 2005: 17-19; 2011: 21-22). Therefore, it is justified to place Clusters 2–4 and Cluster 5 on different tracks, while still allowing specific issues from Clusters 2–4 to escalate when transitional or distributive questions arise. Overall, to put into perspective the frequency with which special arrangements emerge in negotiations, it suffices to take Croatia's accession as an example. Only 10 out of the 21 chapters currently placed in Clusters 2–4 in Croatia's Accession Treaty contained negotiated settlements (see Graph 1).

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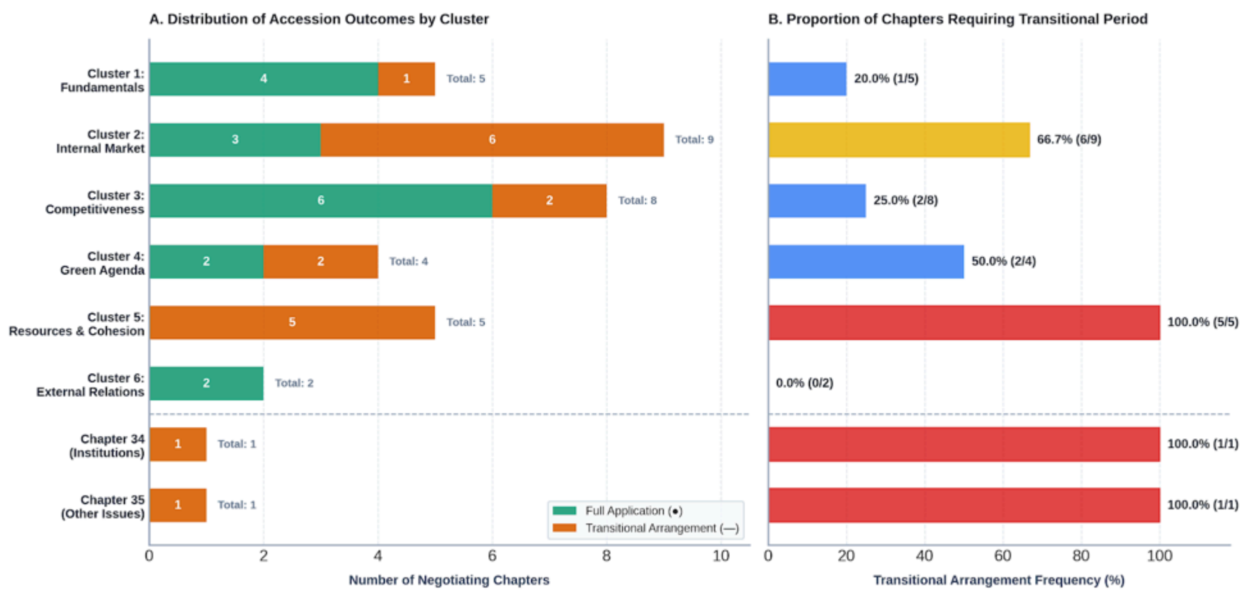
Graph 1: EU Accession Negotiating Clusters and Transitional Arrangements (Croatia Example)



Source: European Commission, 2011.

Having briefly presented the Council's three-track decision-making model, a few clarifications are necessary. The labels for each track do not imply a hierarchy of political importance. For instance, the regulatory alignment track does not merely cover issues of secondary political relevance. The distinction is functional, based on whether the Council's role is to carry out a conformity check against EU legislation, enter into redistributive bargaining, or make broader political judgments on matters not fully covered by the acquis.

The model does not question the appropriateness of vesting the Council with a central role throughout the process. It proposes reforming the Council's decision-making procedures to better reflect the different tasks it performs across issues and stages of accession negotiations. Similarly, it does not advocate eliminating member state influence in enlargement policy. Rather, it suggests reallocating that influence where member states most require it, as documented by historical practice. Preventing member states from obstructing negotiations in Clusters 2–5 over bilateral disputes will increase the transparency and predictability of EU conditionality. Moreover, it will help reinvigorate the perception in candidate countries that enlargement is a merit-based process in which all candidates are treated equally, thereby enhancing the credibility of EU conditionality.

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The model could become more precise at the chapter level, but at the cost of clarity and stability. For instance, one could reasonably argue that Chapter 18 on Statistics (Cluster 1) could be reassigned to the regulatory alignment track. In contrast, geopolitical imperatives could prompt escalation of Chapter 15 on Energy (Cluster 4) to the accession terms and conditions track. Admittedly, there are grey areas in the model. However, for reasons of consistency and pragmatism, the three-track model seeks to build on the 2020 Revised Methodology and complete that reform rather than undo it. In this respect, it treats the cluster structure as the default organising framework, building on the Revised Methodology's differentiated treatment of clusters, grounded in the pre-eminence of Cluster 1 in accession negotiations.

The three-track reform model does not affect the distribution of powers between EU institutions, nor does it question the Council's decision-making authority. Rather, it proposes revising the Council's own decision-making procedures at intermediate stages, where governing rules stem from routine practice codified only in the Negotiating Frameworks of candidate countries rather than in the Treaties. In other words, all stages of an applicant country's EU accession path, as governed by Article 49 TEU, will remain intact. Consequently, the reform could be implemented without a Treaty amendment, through a horizontal, unanimous Council decision that leads to the revision of the Negotiating Frameworks of candidate countries – a step the latter are unlikely to object to. A horizontal agreement is crucial here, as relying solely on country-by-country revisions risks member states objecting to the introduction of these changes within certain Negotiating Frameworks on national preference grounds. Naturally, the reform would also be introduced in all future Negotiating Frameworks (e.g., with Bosnia and Herzegovina or Georgia).

The model does not underestimate the effort required to convince all member states to give up their vetoes over certain clusters at all intermediate stages of accession negotiations. Its chances of being unanimously accepted depend on persuading sceptical member states that they are trading a limited loss of control over issues of lesser political sensitivity (presumptively located in Clusters 2-5) for greater legitimacy in defending their national interests, including through an emergency brake, where it matters most. Member states should also recognise that the reform is reversible and adaptable. The Council could subsequently decide to revise the content of individual tracks (e.g., by reallocating specific clusters or chapters) or their respective decision-making procedures.

The three-track reform model does not propose any changes to the procedure for adopting or revising Negotiating Frameworks. Arguably, if some member states are already reluctant to loosen their control over certain issues or stages of accession negotiations, they will hardly

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agree to relinquish their veto over the entire Negotiating Framework. Moreover, raising both issues simultaneously, namely, the rules for adopting Negotiating Frameworks and the provisions articulated within them, risks diverting attention from the substance of the needed reforms to the way they are adopted procedurally. Therefore, while the model may facilitate a future decision to revise the procedure for adopting or revising Negotiating Frameworks, its implementation does not require such a change.

Overall, this three-track model offers a way out of the impasse between some member states (e.g., Germany and Slovenia) calling for the elimination of unanimity at every stage of accession negotiations, and those resisting any change. By acknowledging the right of member states to defend their vital national interests through a veto, it offers a workable compromise solution. Pro-QMV member states will observe a substantial increase in the predictability, transparency and fairness of accession negotiations, and, thus, in the credibility of EU enlargement conditionality. Conversely, pro-unanimity member states can indeed enhance the legitimacy of their veto right on constitutional and sovereignty issues by relinquishing it in the remaining 26 chapters, where such protection is less necessary. Therefore, the three-track model provides an alternative pathway towards progressively moving away from unanimity across all intermediate stages of accession negotiations.

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Gradual Integration

Since 2023, the EU has routinely stressed the need to advance the gradual integration of candidate countries. In addition, the European Commission provided a baseline conceptual framework through its March 2024 Communication on Pre-Enlargement Reforms and Policy Reviews. Gradual integration is intended to incentivise candidate countries to accelerate their reform efforts by linking compliance with EU conditions to progressive access to EU policies, institutions, and financial instruments. However, despite a steady stream of policy proposals from both think-tanks and key member states (most notably the June 2026 Franco-German non-paper), the EU has yet to develop a fully articulated operational blueprint. Although candidate countries have been offered a few concrete phased integration opportunities in the Single Market (e.g., inclusion in SEPA and access to the 'roam like at home' regime), the next steps in their gradual integration remain unclear.

To operationalise gradual integration, the EU must solve two puzzles. On the one hand, it must select the facets of EU membership that can be extended to candidate countries during the pre-accession period, while accounting for legal constraints, the Union's internal governance needs, and the integrity of the Single Market. On the other hand, the EU must also determine the core accession conditions that candidate countries must fulfil as a matter of priority. In other words, gradual integration is an approach that seeks to align urgently needed reforms with tangible intermediate rewards.

This paper identifies four priority challenges that the EU should help candidate countries to address as a matter of priority: (1) strengthening the rule of law, (2) aligning with and actively contributing to the CFSP, (3) fostering economic convergence with the EU-27 and curbing brain drain, and (4) advancing the green energy transition. It outlines these challenges, highlights the risks and costs of maintaining a 'business-as-usual' approach, and presents a set of policy recommendations to effectively operationalise gradual integration.

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Rule of Law

Toby Vogel (Democratization Policy Council)

Problem diagnosis

Rule of law, the "fundamentals" cluster of accession negotiations, decides a candidate's EU accession and can stall the process. Since the introduction of a revised enlargement methodology in 2020, the fundamentals cluster is the first to be opened and the last to close, and it is the cluster on whose progress the others depend. The problem this diagnosis identifies lies neither in the methodology nor in missing legislation but in the gap between laws and their implementation: the often deliberate behavior of institutions that are formally compliant but in reality serve as instruments of state capture, and the high- and low-level corruption this enables. The pattern is structural rather than country-specific, and the EU remains ill-equipped to admit or address how pervasive state capture is across the enlargement area.

Four problem areas recur across both the Western Balkans and the Eastern candidates regions and account for most of the lag. **Judicial independence** is compromised by appointment and disciplinary channels that survive formal reform, prosecutorial discretion exercised on political timing, and judicial councils whose composition has been engineered by rather than insulated from politics. **Anti-corruption** enforcement concentrates on mid- and low-level cases while leaving the commanding heights of political and economic power untouched, which is why measurable case statistics coexist with unchanged public perceptions. This also demonstrates how state capture persists against a backdrop of proclaimed anti-corruption activity, and how politicization of the judiciary enables selective prosecution. **Media freedom** has deteriorated in many places through similar mechanisms: state advertising and public-broadcaster funding used as leverage, ownership concentrated among government-aligned business figures, and lawsuits and pressure campaigns against investigative outlets that face no institutional counterweight. **Checks and balances** are hollowed by executive or party dominance over parliaments, marginalized independent agencies, and constitutional courts whose rulings are ignored or whose vacancies go unfilled. None of these are transposition failures: these are institutions which are operational yet fail to perform the function attributed to them.

Compounding this is the perception, widely held in both regions, that EU conditionality is applied inconsistently by the EU. Bosnia and Herzegovina's 14 key priorities were narrowed to eight and then to a handful before candidate status was granted in 2022 on visibly reduced

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requirements (which still weren't met). North Macedonia met its benchmarks and was blocked over bilateral disputes. Serbia is an emblematic case where non-merit has been rewarded repeatedly, combining ongoing accession negotiations with sustained pressure on media, courts and electoral integrity, and a multi-vector foreign policy posture that the EU has been reluctant to meaningfully confront. The damage is to the instrument of conditionality: when it is understood as discretionary, it will not drive difficult reforms, nor generate the citizen-level support that would make those reforms politically survivable. The EU's recurring need for good-news stories and successful frontrunners – to convey forward movement (and its own effectiveness) – has repeatedly undercut institutional development in the countries it selected to praise.

Certain departures from this pattern stand out. **Georgia** is no longer a lagging reformer but a case of open democratic backsliding at considerable velocity, with anti-NGO and foreign-agent legislation, contested elections, suppression of protests, and an accession bid stalled for the foreseeable future. **Ukraine** is a partial exception in the other direction: anti-corruption performance under wartime conditions has been treated as a non-negotiable test that the country has so far been meeting, largely because of the vigilance of its own citizenry and independent institutions. **Albania** provides the one instance of deep institutional rebuilding with thorough vetting of judges and prosecutors, and of a rule-of-law institution – the anti-corruption prosecution SPAK – that has earned measurable public support and become the country's most trusted institution. Even in Albania, however, the reform has barely reached everyday corruption, and election-timed prosecutions have generated distrust of the new institutions. **Moldova**, meanwhile, shows state capture emerging earlier on the EU candidacy path, with politically driven judicial and anti-corruption reform, independent figures removed through restructuring. The EU has been reluctant to acknowledge shortcomings in Moldova, a political partner in whose success the EU is politically vested.

This diagnosis rests on earlier work in the project. The candidate-side and EU-elite interviews conducted under GEO-POWER-EU established a divergence: where EU interlocutors locate the deficit in the candidate countries and treat merit as a principle rather than a relative concept, candidate-country elites locate it in shifting benchmarks and an indulgent EU disposition toward incumbent power. Focus-group research in Bosnia and Herzegovina found participants associating EU conditionality and assistance with elite enrichment rather than with better courts, and identified pre-accession funding as a force multiplier for entrenched elites: something that empowers the people in power. More generally, the GEO-POWER-EU survey confirmed that respondents across the surveyed countries view corruption as the main

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challenge their country would face in the next five years, with 35% of all respondents selecting it. It was the top concern in Bosnia and Herzegovina (67%), Albania (55%), North Macedonia (51%), Serbia (37%), and Montenegro (36%), while it came second in Kosovo (39%), Moldova (19%), and Ukraine (13%) (GEO-POWER-EU, Public Opinion Survey Report: Foreign Policy Perceptions in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership, no date, p.29). Evidence from interviews, focus groups, and the survey shows that the compliance gap is visible in both regions despite differences between countries and their EU accession stages – an indication that the cause lies in the architecture and practice of conditionality rather than in any country's specifics.

The cost of non-enlargement

The one rule-of-law element that is unequivocally tied to full membership in the EU is enforceable jurisdiction: binding Court of Justice rulings, infringement proceedings, and the instruments of mutual recognition that presuppose trust between judiciaries. Everything short of membership can transmit standards and financing but cannot place a candidate's judicial system under the EU's enforceable legal order. What happens to rule-of-law consolidation in both regions if the current trajectory continues and accession does not materialize?

Business-as-usual and the draining of reform incentives

Business-as-usual is not a holding pattern that would preserve the current status quo. Rather, incentives for reform are transferred with increasing speed from the EU accession process to domestic political calculations, which in most of these countries do not favor independent courts or effective prosecutors. Delay does not directly reverse reforms but removes incentives to implement and defend them, which over a long enough time horizon produces the same outcome. The EU's unanimity requirement, which allows a single member state to stall a candidate over a bilateral dispute, turns the process from a merit test into a theatre for contested concepts of national identity, borders, or history. Governments that have understood this mechanism are likely to stop investing political capital in reforms that may no longer lead to rewards. The effects may be quite immediate: vetting processes stall after the first cohort, anti-corruption bodies keep their mandate but lose their budget and their protected personnel, media regulators are quietly repopulated with government allies.

If accession states come to perceive that the EU's policy is in reality one of non-enlargement, then any leverage is removed entirely, without substituting anything, and yet potentially still allowing for financial flows to accession states (and thereby reinforcing noncompliant behavior

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and empowering incumbent elites). Association agreements, the Growth Plan and sectoral market access transmit standards but their financial conditionality does not provide the same degree of legal enforceability and systemic leverage as the accession process itself and cannot compel application of the *acquis*, and none of them carries sanctions that a captured government would fear. The result is drift, a vacuum that rival geopolitical actors will seek to fill, leaving reform-minded domestic constituencies – above all, civil society – without the external reference point and incentive that has underwritten their arguments to date.

The effect on civil society

Indeed, the highest and least recognized cost falls on civil society organizations advocating democratic reform. These organizations have served as a monitoring infrastructure for the accession process. They supply the evidence base for Commission reports, litigate cases that test judicial independence, and preserve the institutional memory of what was promised in each negotiating round. But their leverage (such as it is) derives almost entirely from the credibility of the process they monitor, along with their traction with the EU institutions and the member states, which allows a small watchdog to place an issue on a government's agenda.

When the prospect of accession is removed or indefinitely suspended, three things follow: monitoring organizations lose their main leverage because a government that no longer needs a favorable assessment from the EU can now safely ignore any criticism; they lose much of their funding, since accession-linked instruments and member-state bilateral programs are both justified by the enlargement rationale; and they lose some of their international protection as the reputational cost of harassing a watchdog falls sharply once Brussels is no longer vested in its operations, as the Georgian foreign-agent legislation demonstrated. These factors matter because they are not reversible by a simple political decision. Rebuilding an investigative outlet or a legal-aid organization after its staff have left – and perhaps emigrated or moved into private business – could take months or years, and any future re-engagement would find the domestic partners it depends on substantially thinned out.

For this reason, any fallback strategy under the non-enlargement scenario should seek to preserve the strongest instrument the EU holds outside the accession framework: visa-free travel, access to single-market sectors, Erasmus and creative-sector participation, and funding and policy support for civil society and independent media, all channeled *around* captured governments. These are the benefits that reach citizens most tangibly and could help sustain the constituencies required for any later re-engagement. On the rule of law specifically, with Serbia and Albania being the immediate test cases, the EU should stop trading tolerance for

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weak rule-of-law performance (or even backsliding) for promises of alignment on other issues such as economic regulation or geopolitical positioning. That bargain corrodes EU credibility without securing the alignment it seeks; in spite of spending both money and moral capital, the EU will be left weaker and less secure.

Recommendations for staged, gradual integration

The policy recommendations that follow address a scenario in which some form of gradual integration of candidate countries materializes as the EU's path ahead on enlargement. They therefore focus on what should be prioritized assuming that candidate countries will all eventually become full members. In other words, they concern a sequence of reforms linked to specific intermediate rewards, rather than alternatives to full membership.

1. **Create rule of law baselines for each candidate/potential candidate.** The European Commission should commission independent rule of law baseline reports for each candidate or potential candidate country to establish a baseline against which progress can be measured, and to provide targeted recommendations for priority actions. These could be modelled on the "Priebe report" for Bosnia and Herzegovina (Expert Report on Rule of Law issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina, December 2019).
2. **Open access to cohesion-scale funds, not only IPA, conditioned on rule-of-law progress.** IPA is useful but too small and weakly targeted; cohesion funds are an order of magnitude larger and would make reform rewards politically visible. Tied to fundamentals-cluster milestones and channeled through appropriate monitoring mechanisms (see below), this would convert the strongest available carrot into a rule-of-law instrument.
3. **Reduce the discretionary component of conditionality.** Tie each phase-in benefit to specific rule-of-law benchmarks which trigger the granting of that benefit on achievement of the benchmark, and a recommendation by the European Commission to suspend a candidate benefits in response to regression. This is primarily a political rather than a legal commitment but if consistently implemented and communicated could still reduce what is seen as a credibility problem by accession partners. The Council of the EU's unanimity-bound decision-making and the credibility problem it entails will be addressed in a separate, overarching recommendation.
4. **Publish a benchmark-to-benefit map.** Make explicit and clearly explain which rule-of-law milestones unlock which market, funding, or institutional-participation right. This answers the candidate demand for clear, visible steps and for opening all clusters and negotiating them in parallel, without conceding a fixed accession date, and

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highlighting that phased access is a preparatory rather than an alternative route. In addition to serving as a roadmap for elites, this will – if communicated properly – allow citizens of the candidate countries as well as EU citizens to see who is responsible for stagnation or regression.

5. **Rebalance the fundamentals cluster.** Given the identification by the GEO-POWER-EU project of "corrosive capital" – including from member states – as a particular risk for candidate countries, the procurement chapter of the fundamentals cluster (chapter 5) should be given the same weight as other rule of law elements of the *acquis* and its benchmarks should be prioritized and transparently applied to infrastructure and investment projects in candidate countries (in particular, mining/extraction and green energy investments). The European Commission should consider introducing interim benchmarks, as do Chapters 23 and 24. This would help reduce the potential for corruption while supporting institutional resilience against further state capture facilitated by EU member states. Corresponding support to local and regional civic watchdogs is essential in order to maximize these incentives.
6. **Deliver a defined share of rule-of-law assistance below the central government.** Increase funding to local authorities, judicial institutions, and civil society, including the monitoring mechanism that is currently missing, to counter the effect of empowering incumbent elites. Predictable multi-annual funding for reform-advocacy organizations matters most precisely in the business-as-usual scenario, when it is the only instrument still reaching the constituency that sustains reform. Specifics of any such arrangement require care, however, in order not to entrench local or regional (sub-national) powerbrokers, in particular in Bosnia and Herzegovina with its already highly decentralized governance.
7. **Verify benchmarks independently.** The European Commission should systematically use independent monitoring rather than self-reporting in decision-making on rule of law issues, mirroring the baseline reports (recommendation 1, above). It should also include all WB6 and EaP countries in the annual rule of law review, not just the four WB countries currently covered, to provide specialized and focused monitoring in addition to the more general annual reporting. Independent verification directly informing decision-making provides a structural counterweight to the perception of double standards, and addresses the tendency to avoid acknowledging reform failure. Government failures should be transparently communicated, in particular to candidate-country citizens, to enable them to hold their elected representatives accountable. Determining the organizations to rely upon for independent monitoring is

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key; and this approach needs to be substantially changed and decentralized as described in recommendation 8 (below).

8. **Fundamentally decentralize support to civil society organizations.** Increase funding for civil society capacity-building by supporting incubator initiatives with the goal of expanding the roster of independent organizations with the capacity to provide external rule of law monitoring and competing for/managing EU funds. This would create greater impact than the current model which relies on large, professional, capitals-based organizations, and would also help to minimize the potential for these intermediate organizations to become even partly captured or affected by the prevailing political dynamics. One or more studies for how this approach could be developed should be commissioned immediately with the goal of implementing this new civil society support strategy by July 2027.

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Defense, Security and the Reform of Enlargement

Sonja Stojanović Gajić, University of Rijeka

1. Problem diagnosis

EU enlargement now operates in a security environment for which its traditional apparatus was not designed. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 revived the prospect of protracted conventional war in Europe.

Where Russia's pre-2022 policy relied on economic leverage and covert influence to keep enlargement countries in its orbit, Moscow now treats EU and NATO enlargement as an existential threat to be resisted directly: sustained war in Ukraine, continued military entrenchment in Georgia's and Moldova's occupied territories, and expanded basing and exercises along NATO's Arctic flank. This is matched by intensifying hybrid activity, as a rising trend in disinformation, cyberattacks and covert financing across the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership (GeoPower-EU Interdependence Database, 2025) alongside shadow-fleet-launched drone incursions over airports and military sites across a dozen NATO members, calibrated to stay below the threshold for collective response. Russia no longer competes with the EU for influence at the margins; it contests its enlargement, cohesion and deterrence as a single strategic front.

At the same time, the U.S. engagement in European defence has grown less certain since the start of the second Trump administration. The 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy calls for ending Europe's dependence on Washington and shifting conventional defence to European allies (White House, 2025, pp. 25–27). At the same time, subsequent troop reductions and President Trump's questioning of NATO commitments have exposed European dependence on U.S. intelligence, strategic enablers, air and missile defence, and selected weapons. The U.S. foreign policy shift is visible in both EU enlargement regions. Washington has moved from open-ended security guarantor toward a more transactional posture: in Ukraine, prioritising a swift end to the war over reversing Russian aggression and tying support to access to critical raw materials; in Moldova, increased security assistance alongside doubts about reliability (Yousif & Stohl, 2025, p. 7); and in the Western Balkans, a declared shift from nation-building to “mutually beneficial partnerships” (U.S. Department of State, 2026, p. 2) paired with a transactional commercial push around LNG, gas interconnectors, critical minerals and Kushner-led real estate development (Krainc, 2026; Atlantic Council, 2026).

Funded by the European Union

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These changes have driven the EU's post-2022 transformation from a project built on economic integration and civilian power toward one in which defence is the fastest-developing area of integration, focused on readiness for high-intensity conflict: closing capability gaps, replenishing stocks, expanding ammunition and weapons production, reducing dependencies, and improving military mobility. These changes are followed with new instruments (European Defence Industry Reinforcement through common Procurement Act - EDIRPAt, ASAP for production capacity, SAFE for large-scale defence financing). Following the 2024 Niinistö Report, this military concept of "readiness" has been complemented by whole-of-society "preparedness" encompassing civilian-military resilience covering critical infrastructure, supply chains, energy, cyber resilience, institutional continuity and societal capacity to function through crisis. In sum, the EU is not just spending more on defence but expanding what it does in defence, from coordination toward financing, procurement, industrial mobilisation and whole-of-society preparedness.

1.1. The lack of synergy between defence and enlargement policies

This expanding defence agenda has not been matched by a parallel rethink of enlargement. The central policy gap is not the absence of EU activity, but the lack of synergy and shared vision between defence integration and enlargement policy, visible in three respects.

First, fragmented monitoring leaves important governance and defence risks outside the accession process. Security and defence issues appear across chapters designed for other purposes and are rarely assessed as a coherent system of governance (Table 1).

Table 1. Security and defence issues in the accession process

Cluster	chapter	What is covered	Main blind spots
1- Fundamentals	Functioning of Democratic Institutions	Civilian/democratic oversight of security and defence	Intelligence accountability; oversight beyond parliament; proofing the security sector against capture by politicians
	Chapter 5	public procurement	defence procurement integrity;
	Chapter 23	Police conduct in relation to fundamental and political rights (protection from torture, privacy, freedom of assembly...)	Surveillance abuse; defence and intelligence service's integrity

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Cluster	chapter	What is covered	Main blind spots
		police integrity, where identified as part of anti-corruption	
	Chapter 24	Borders, migration, organised crime, terrorism, police/judicial cooperation	Police governance and professionalisation; links to intelligence and hybrid-threat response
6 External Relations	Chapter 30	Dual-use export controls, trade and external economic relations	Security consequences of strategic dependencies and sensitive investment
	Chapter 31	CFSP alignment, sanctions, participation in CSDP missions, classified information, hybrid threats, EPF/PESCO interest	Parallel intelligence/cyber/procurement ties, with strategic competitors; Societal resilience
	Other chapters	Civil protection,	No coherent whole-of-society resilience test across the accession process

Even where democratic control of security institutions is examined, Commission reporting tends to reduce it to parliamentary oversight of annual reports, rather than assessing whether oversight institutions can investigate misconduct effectively. Moreover, even this limited criterion is not consistently applied. Pavković and Dimitrov's (2024) showed in the review of the Commission's monitoring of the functioning of democratic institutions that even this narrow criterion is applied inconsistently across countries and years.

There are also substantial substantive blind spots. High-risk areas for political misuse, such as intelligence services and surveillance and interception, are not regularly assessed. EC does not connect findings across chapters: civilian control of security institutions under the Functioning of Democratic Institutions, surveillance safeguards under Chapter 23, and foreign-policy alignment under Chapter 31, without asking whether political capture, intrusive surveillance and opaque defence contracts form part of the same governance problem. The EU has shown that more systematic scrutiny is possible. After North Macedonia’s 2015 wiretapping crisis, the Priebe expert group traced failures horizontally across intelligence, executive power, police, prosecution, courts, parliament and independent oversight, revealing institutional capture that

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chapter-by-chapter monitoring obscured (Pejić & Stojanović Gajić, 2018). Such reviews, however, remain exceptional and crisis-driven rather than preventive.

Security and defence procurement is another under-scrutinised risk: EU-commissioned research identifies it as one of six high-risk sectors for corruption (Persson, Worth & Jeney, 2024), given secrecy, exemptions from ordinary rules and limited competition. As spending grows, these safeguards should be built into enlargement monitoring through Chapter 5, not left until accession. Deeper defence integration without stronger accountability would import vulnerabilities into the Union rather than remedy them (Gressel & Popescu, 2025, pp. 12–13). Cluster 6 shows a related gap. Chapter 31 monitors declaratory CFSP alignment but does not examine parallel defence and security cooperation with strategic competitors, such as arms procurement, intelligence-sharing, cyber cooperation, joint exercises (Gressel & Popescu, 2025, pp. 4–6). Serbia illustrates the stakes: alongside Western cooperation, it has an FSB cooperation agreement and China as its largest arms supplier; Georgia sources 94% of arms purchases from Turkey, the highest single-actor concentration in the region (GeoPower-EU Interdependence Database, 2025). Full CFSP alignment would not, by itself, reveal these dependencies or exposure to external leverage.

The last blind spot is the neglect of societal resilience. Preparedness is treated only in fragments: civil protection under Chapter 27, and hybrid threats under Chapter 31. The Preparedness Union Strategy, built on the Niinistö Report (European Commission and High Representative, 2025) instead defines resilience as a whole-of-society task involving governments, local communities, civil society, business and academia, and calls for stronger mutual resilience with candidate countries. Ukraine shows civilian infrastructure is itself a defence asset: functioning local government, communications, energy networks and independent media sustain essential functions under attack, at low-cost relative to arms procurement. Yet the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) risks shifting preparedness financing mainly to national governments, potentially weakening support for investigative journalism, election watchdogs and civil society that expose disinformation and scrutinise institutions, undermining preparedness policy's own logic (European Economic and Social Committee, 2025).

1.2. Lack of a systematic pathway for transforming and integrating candidate countries' defence sectors with the EU

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Defence reform was historically left largely to NATO, while EU enlargement concentrated on economic and democratic transformation (Gressel & Popescu, 2025). That division of labour no longer works because NATO and EU membership trajectories do not coincide. Moldova and Serbia are not pursuing NATO membership, while Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Georgia and Ukraine face different constraints that may prevent them from joining. Yet, NATO standards remain the practical foundation for interoperability among European armed forces. Candidates, therefore, need convergence regardless of eventual NATO membership. The accession process currently lacks systematic scrutiny **of military organisation, capabilities, interoperability, intelligence, cyber defence or defence-industrial transformation of candidates.** Gressel and Popescu (2025) propose Defence Cooperation Roadmaps using NATO standards as the interoperability benchmark while extending EU scrutiny to defence governance, military organisation, industry, intelligence and cybersecurity (Gressel & Popescu, 2025, pp. 7–8).

The EU already has many relevant tools. Ukraine, an exceptional war-driven case, receives military training through EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM) plus European Peace Facility (EPF)-financed equipment and growing integration into EU defence-industrial initiatives. Moldova shows a model for a neutral candidate, combining EPF-funded capability development of armed forces with the civilian EU Partnership Mission against hybrid threats and a PESCO-supported Cyber Rapid Response Team. This training-equipping-advising approach is far more developed in the Eastern neighbourhood than the Western Balkans and remains poorly connected to enlargement (Karjalainen & Iso-Markku, 2026).

The second gap is **the distance between formal eligibility and operational access**. Candidates may engage through Security and Defence Partnerships (SDPs), EPF assistance, European Defence Agency (EDA) cooperation and new industrial instruments. SAFE permits candidates and potential candidates to participate in common procurement with Member States, with agreements able to open broader industrial participation (Council of the EU, 2025). Yet SDPs with Moldova, Albania and North Macedonia have not produced comparable operational integration, and Serbia’s EDA administrative arrangement since 2013 has not led to broad participation in EU defence projects (Tothova, 2026).

The current architecture resembles a collection of gateways rather than a staged pathway integrating candidates' armed forces, companies and infrastructure into European capability planning, procurement and supply chains.

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Table 2. Candidate access to selected EU defence mechanisms (August 2026)

Mechanism	**General pattern across candidates**	**Notable exceptions**
EDA European Defence Agency	Mostly limited or absent association, SDPs for Albania, Moldova and North Macedonia open possibility for cooperation	Serbia (since 2013) and Ukraine (since 2015) hold Administrative Arrangements
European Defence Fund-EDF & European Defence Industry Programme -EDIP	Largely restricted; no candidate-wide association route	Ukraine holds a special, war-driven EDIP role through €300 million earmarked for the Ukraine Support Instrument. It is also negotiating an association agreement for EDF.
SAFE - Security Action for Europe	Most candidates can join common procurement, but broader industrial access needs a further agreement	Ukraine is an explicit common-procurement participant.
PESCO	No candidate holds a project seat. SDPs for Albania, Moldova and North Macedonia open possibilities for cooperation.	Albania and North Macedonia show interest; Moldova received Cyber Rapid Response Team support

1.3 Missed opportunities for EU readiness

The third and most urgent problem is that the same fragmentation leads to missed opportunities to strengthen EU readiness. The EU seeks more ammunition, drones, resilient supply chains and strategic enablers precisely when relevant capabilities in candidate countries remain peripheral to its planning. The Western Balkans illustrate this: Krstinovska and Marrone (2025) identify around 200 defence-related companies, mostly in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with strengths in ammunition and explosives and emerging drone capacity—Bosnia and Herzegovina alone has estimated annual capacity of 500,000 artillery shells. The region also offers strategic enablers: geographic position for military mobility, training facilities, logistics and medical support (Krstinovska & Marrone, 2025, p. 29). Yet no EU Military Mobility Fund resources have reached Western Balkan projects, and unlike Ukraine and

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Moldova, none of the Balkan candidates is an observer in the EU Military Mobility Transport Group or PESCO Military Mobility (Zorić & Gjoni, 2026, p. 9). Integrating these enablers into EU planning and financing would simultaneously build candidates' interoperability and the Union's own capacity to move, train and sustain forces.

2. The cost of business as usual, or of no enlargement

Business as usual imposes costs for both candidates and the EU. Full membership cannot eliminate security risk, but it changes a state's political and legal position through the mutual-assistance commitment in Article 42(7) TEU. Delay leaves exposed candidates investing in interoperability without certainty about the end-state. For the EU, delay wastes capacity and leverage: candidate industries, training grounds, logistics, cyber expertise and Ukraine's battlefield experience could contribute to European readiness, but if access stays narrow, firms and governments will seek finance and partnerships elsewhere. For example, Turkey is already filling gaps through arms sales to Georgia and defence-industrial know-how in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia. The result can be incompatible systems, fragmented procurement and strategic dependencies that grow costlier to unwind, while weakening the EU's ability to demand candidates reduce risky ties when it offers no credible substitute.

The appropriate response differs by scenario. Under **partial integration**, the EU should preserve a clear membership path and make interim defence access conditional, reversible and measurable, so associate arrangements do not become a permanent waiting room. Under **prolonged delay**, the priority is keeping candidates interoperable and anchored through procurement, mobility, cyber and resilience projects while maintaining Fundamentals conditionality. Under **no enlargement**, the EU would still need durable security frameworks with neighbours, but with less transformative leverage and more transactional partnerships. In all three, leaving defence outside enlargement is the costliest option, combining exposure with fragmentation.

3. Operationalizing Gradual Integration – Policy Recommendations

3. 1. Create a Security, Defence and Preparedness Convergence Roadmap for every candidate

The European Commission should introduce a Security, Defence and Preparedness Convergence Roadmap for each candidate that complements rule-of-law conditionality, connects monitoring across Clusters 1 and 6, fills gaps in the existing acquis and links measurable progress to gradual defence integration.

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Rather than creating a new accession chapter, the Roadmap should establish common benchmarks covering **(1) democratic governance and integrity of security and defence institutions**, including intelligence, surveillance and corruption and procurement risks; **(2) defence readiness** in relation to NATO standards covering military organisation, command and control, capability development, logistics, cyber defence, intelligence reform, military mobility and interoperability, **(3) strategic and defence alignment**, extending Chapter 31 beyond declaratory CFSP alignment to defence procurement, exercises, intelligence and cyber cooperation and third-country dependencies; and **(4) societal preparedness and resilience**.

These benchmarks should complement, not replace, the Fundamentals and existing rule-of-law monitoring with more specialised benchmarks that could be borrowed from other international organizations, e.g. OSCE Code of Conduct on Political-Military Affairs, NATO Defence Integrity Initiative and applied consistently across candidates and years (Pavković & Dimitrov 2024; Gressel and Popescu 2025: 7–8). Where the EU lacks implementation capacity, could be delegated to the coalition of willing member states (similar to the organization of PESCO projects currently), key defence partners (UK, Norway, Switzerland), or NATO with progress tested through exercises, training and capability assessments rather than formal policy adoption alone.

The key to success is that this type of engagement is accompanied by incentives, following the reform-and-reward logic of visa-liberalisation roadmaps and the Growth Plan. Meeting benchmarks should unlock the stages of defence integration set out in Recommendation 3.2; regression should delay or reverse benefits already granted. **Priebe-style independent expert reviews should become a standing diagnostic tool**, triggered when serious security-sector capture is suspected, cutting across acquis chapters, and feeding directly into concrete Roadmap benchmarks and follow-up requirements, as in the case of North Macedonia (Pejić & Stojanović Gajić 2018).

In parallel, the preparedness and societal resilience of candidates should become a dedicated component of the monitoring and the next MFF funding for accession countries, covering both physical resilience and the civic infrastructure required to sustain societies during disasters, hybrid attacks, and war. EU support for implementation should not be channelled exclusively through candidate governments. A dedicated share should strengthen independent media, investigative journalists, research organisations, and civil society watchdogs, so that they

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can contribute to societal preparedness while independently scrutinising work of security institutions and rising defence expenditure. Ukraine offers a relevant model: civil society complementing state capacity while monitoring corruption risks. This would help prevent a security-driven "stabilocracy" in which executive capacity grows without corresponding accountability, consistent with the EU's own whole-of-society approach to preparedness (European Commission and High Representative 2025).

3. 2. Use gradual defence integration to reward progress under the Roadmaps without creating new unanimity requirements

Progress verified under the Security, Defence and Preparedness Convergence Roadmaps should determine a candidate's eligibility for progressively deeper forms of defence integration.

The European Commission should determine the progress against all benchmarks in the Roadmaps and propose **when a candidate is ready to advance; while** the Council decides on **gradual integration and determines what forms of participation and support that progress unlocks. This should not create a separate defence track or additional unanimity requirements.** A positive assessment should make a candidate eligible for progressively deeper benefits, while insufficient progress should prevent advancement. The decision-making procedure should then depend on the type of reward concerned. Where an existing EU defence instrument already provides a procedure for admitting, supporting or involving a third country, that procedure should apply. The Three-Track Model should operate only as a residual rule where a separate Council decision on enlargement-related defence integration is required but no instrument-specific procedure exists. In such cases, decisions concerning security and defence integration should fall under the Constitutional-Sovereignty Track, Reinforced Qualified Majority Voting (ReQMV) with the emergency brake, rather than introducing a new unanimity requirement.

First, create a common entry point. The EU candidates meeting the Roadmap conditions should be awarded with country-specific implementation plans with projects, financing and deadlines. Existing SDPs already provide gateways for capability development, training, cyber and hybrid-threat cooperation and engagement with the European Defence Agency (EDA) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO); what is missing is systematic implementation. The Roadmap’s defence-readiness component should operationalise NATO-based interoperability benchmarks, particularly for candidates outside a NATO accession track, without duplicating NATO defence planning. For EDA cooperation, the existing EDA framework applies:

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administrative arrangements with third countries require Council approval by unanimity, while the EDA Steering Board otherwise normally acts by QMV, subject to its national-policy safeguard; participation of third countries in particular projects may then be organised under the relevant project arrangements. PESCO project participation is similarly governed by its own rules: project members must unanimously agree that they wish to invite a third State and the Council then decides under Article 46(6) TEU; the administrative arrangement with the third State is agreed unanimously by the project members.

Second, progressively involve compliant candidates in EU defence policy-making without decision-making rights. Structured CFSP and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) exchanges could develop into observer or consultative access, where feasible, to relevant formats involving the European Union Military Committee, European Union Military Staff and Rapid Deployment Capacity. Joint training and exercises should accompany institutional access, building interoperability, trust and preparing candidates for membership (Krstinovska and Marrone 2025: 29). Where access can be provided under an existing institutional or CSDP arrangement, its existing procedure should apply. Where no specific legal procedure exists and a Council decision is considered necessary specifically to grant a candidate a higher level of pre-accession institutional participation, the Three-Track Model should supply the rule: ReQMV with the emergency brake. Genuine CSDP operational decisions would remain outside this residual rule and continue to be governed by the TEU, including unanimity where required.

Third, make operational, industrial and financial integration the principal reward for further progress. Higher compliance should unlock greater EPF assistance, joint training and exercises, joint procurement, defence-industrial investment, funding for military mobility, and dual-use infrastructure. Candidate companies should progressively enter European supply chains, joint ventures and the emerging common European defence market. EPF assistance measures remain CFSP measures requiring a Council decision under the EPF framework and therefore unanimity. PESCO and EDA participation remain governed by their specific procedures described above. SAFE already permits candidate countries to participate in common procurements with Member States receiving SAFE assistance; broader eligibility of their industries and products can be opened through agreements under Article 17 of the SAFE Regulation. The EU should exploit the different decision-making rules governing these instruments. Defence-industrial initiatives, joint procurement and project funding provide greater scope to proceed through qualified majority voting (QMV), whereas operational defence matters (e.g. remain subject to unanimity, and cooperation through the EDA and PESCO depends on their specific procedures and Member-State consent (Krstinovska and Marrone 2025: 26). Where an instrument already

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permits candidate participation, a positive Roadmap assessment should therefore function as a political gateway to making fuller use of that possibility rather than trigger an additional unanimous Council decision. The EU can therefore move faster on industrial integration, procurement and project funding while opening more sensitive institutional and operational cooperation as top reward once confidence and convergence increase.

Fourth, make progression conditional and reversible. Serious deterioration under the Fundamentals, misuse of EU defence funding, declining CFSP alignment and security breaches or security relationships creating unacceptable strategic dependencies with the EU competitors, should stop advancement and, where legally possible, suspend the benefits. Non-progression should be the simplest consequence: where the Commission finds that the conditions for the next stage have not been met, the candidate should not receive the next reward. For benefits already granted, the principle should be **instrument-specific reversibility**: EPF support should be suspended or terminated under EPF procedures; participation in a PESCO project under the PESCO third-State rules; and funding, procurement or other project benefits according to the rules of the instrument through which they were granted. Where deterioration is sufficiently serious to justify a horizontal freeze of further gradual defence integration across several instruments, the Council should take that enlargement-policy decision under the Constitutional-Sovereignty Track through ReQMV with the emergency brake. The EU's 2024 suspension of € 30 million in EPF support to Georgia due to democratic backsliding illustrates this principle: candidate status does not guarantee continued security integration when the political conditions underpinning it deteriorate.

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Economic convergence, competitiveness and brain drain

Kristijan Fidanovski and Branimir Jovanović (Vienna Institute for Economic Studies)

Problem diagnosis

Evidence presented in the report on economic convergence and brain drain, prepared within the framework of the GEO-POWER-EU project, shows that convergence with EU living standards remains slow and uneven across the EU candidate countries. GDP per capita in the countries covered by the comparative report ranges from only 28% to 54% of the EU average in purchasing power terms. At the pace recorded in recent years, some countries would need more than a century to reach the EU average (Jovanovic & Necev, 2026). Since accession is neither imminent nor sufficient in closing the gaps, these dynamics reinforce the need for more gradual integration that would help accelerate convergence.

Evidence from ten focus group discussions and a multi-country survey conducted in the analysed countries, as well as the broader literature on brain drain in these regions, suggest that high-skilled emigration is both a consequence of slow convergence and a key obstacle to economic and societal convergence with EU standards of living.

In all analysed countries, high-skilled emigration is widely perceived as a structural, normalized, and rational response to persistent economic constraints, institutional weaknesses, and limited professional prospects. According to our public opinion survey (GEO-POWER EU Survey, 2025), about a fifth of citizens are considering emigrating in the next two years. More than half of citizens cited economic reasons as a key driver of emigration intentions. Economic concerns top the list of drivers in all countries, ahead of dissatisfaction with education and healthcare systems or the lack of rule of law, although the latter set of factors also consistently appear among citizens' five biggest 'push' factors for contemplating emigration (Figure 1).

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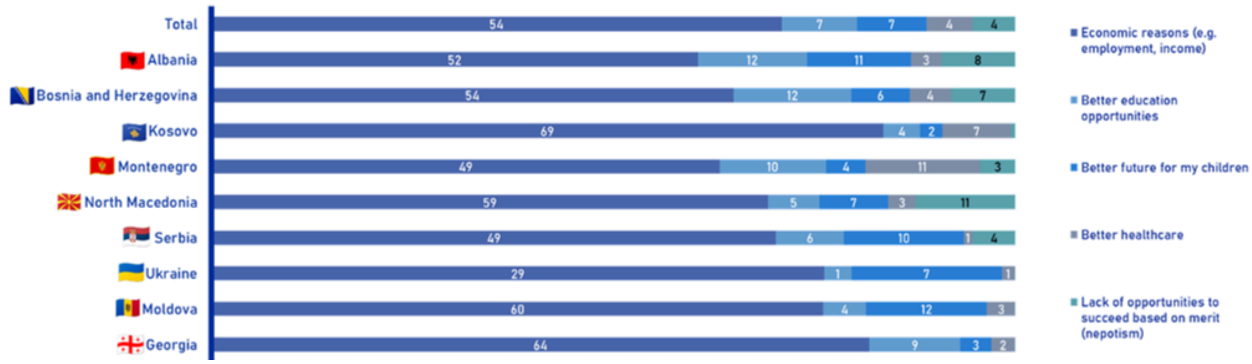
Figure 1. First-mentioned reasons for considering moving abroad, top five (% of respondents considering moving abroad)



Source: GEO-POWER-EU survey, 2025, p.33.

Note: The survey question was: "What are the main reasons for considering moving abroad?" Respondents could provide multiple answers. The figure shows only the top five first-mentioned reasons. Results are expressed as shares of respondents who are considering moving abroad.

Our ten focus groups corroborate and deepen these findings, with respondents generally arguing that emigration offers higher income, stability, and a peace of mind for emigrants. The focus groups also show, however, that the reasons for leaving go beyond income. Participants also emphasised insecure employment, limited opportunities for career progression, unaffordable housing and an inability to plan for the future. Weak public services, corruption and a perceived lack of merit-based opportunities further contribute to the view that emigration offers not only better earnings, but also greater predictability, dignity and professional recognition.

At the same time, emigration generates significant long-term costs (brain drain) for their countries of origin, including loss of skills and labor, weakened institutions, demographic decline, and social fragmentation. The World Bank's 2026 assessment underlines that the region is among Europe's most rapidly ageing, with at least one in five residents expected to be over 65 within the next decade. It therefore identifies higher participation by women and young people, affordable childcare and eldercare, better training, and more effective labour-market institutions as central to mitigating the combined effects of ageing and outmigration (World Bank, 2026). These effects, in turn, further reinforce emigration pressures, creating a vicious circle that is difficult to break. This process is also gendered: the survey recorded lower emigration intentions among women than among men, while the focus group research suggested that women who remain may face additional family and care responsibilities. More

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broadly, women tend to experience weaker labour market outcomes in many candidate countries. Despite contextual differences – most notably the war in Ukraine – the underlying drivers and consequences are remarkably consistent across countries.

Underlying these trends is economic growth that remains too weak to close income gaps with the EU or generate enough well-paid, high-quality jobs. This reflects both the outdated growth model based on low labour costs, low taxes and foreign investment in relatively low-value-added activities, as well as the slow EU accession process that has so far provided insufficient impetus for faster convergence.

The cost of business as usual or no enlargement

The stagnation of the enlargement process is increasingly costly for the candidate countries, with some of them being candidate countries for decades, without a credible prospect for membership. The macro-econometric model developed by Jovanovic et al. (forthcoming) illustrates these costs. Under the baseline scenario, in which the current situation continues, annual GDP growth in the Western Balkans remains at around 3–3.5%. This is too slow to close the income gap with the EU meaningfully. Population decline also continues, with the region losing around 100,000 people each year.

The cost of stagnation is becoming more visible in the near-term outlook. The World Bank's Spring 2026 Western Balkans Regular Economic Report revised regional growth for 2026 down from 3.1% to 2.8%, citing persistent inflation and heightened uncertainty. It also stresses that rapid population ageing and continued outward migration are tightening labour supply. At the same time, the report estimates that matching labour-force participation rates in comparable EU economies could add more than 2.8 million workers across the Western Balkans, highlighting the scale of the region's unused human-capital potential (World Bank (2026), Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, Spring 2026) .

The model suggests that EU membership could significantly alter this trajectory. Under a scenario of immediate membership, annual GDP growth rises to around 5–6%, while mid- to long-term population decline slows substantially. By 2040, the Western Balkans would have around 270,000 more inhabitants under EU membership than under the baseline scenario. Labour market and human development outcomes would also improve, with faster growth in the number of tertiary-educated workers and higher employment, particularly among women and young people. While this scenario might not be particularly realistic at the present moment, it clearly illustrates the gains from faster and deeper EU integration.

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Although the evidence presented here relates only to the Western Balkans, similar—and potentially stronger—effects could be expected in the Eastern Partnership countries. Their lower income levels would likely imply larger EU transfers relative to GDP after accession, while their weaker integration into EU markets and value chains leaves greater scope for gains from access to the EU single market. On the downside, their proximity to Russia entails higher political and security risks, but on balance these are likely to be outweighed by the economic benefits.

A change in the approach is therefore urgently needed, with gradual integration offering a feasible way forward. While it should not become a permanent substitute for membership, it is clearly preferable to the current unsustainable status quo, which weakens convergence, fuels emigration and erodes trust in the enlargement process. It is worth highlighting that the recommendations below are only partly applicable to Ukraine, whose convergence prospects will be heavily impacted by the duration of Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion and the success of postwar reconstruction efforts.

Operationalizing Gradual Integration – Policy Recommendations

A key requirement for faster convergence of the candidate countries towards the EU is frontloading the benefits of membership. The EU should speed up accession where possible, and where this is not immediately feasible, provide earlier access to (some) EU funds and (areas of) the Single Market. Research shows that these are the two key channels through which EU accession speeds up convergence (Jovanovic & Necev, 2026; Jovanovic & Fidanovski, 2024). Pre-accession brain drain is higher in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries today than in past EU candidates (Fidanovski, 2024; Jovanovic et al, forthcoming), so providing young people – a key pro-EU constituency – with opportunities for a future at home is key both for living standard convergence and for EU accession. The key is to push for convergence in as many areas as possible during the accession process rather than upon accession, as brain drain will otherwise only intensify, slowing convergence further.

A new growth model is also needed. Without faster productivity growth and better employment opportunities, income gaps with the EU will persist and continue to encourage high-skilled emigration. The EU's current growth trajectory, underpinned by the seminal 2024 Draghi report, which firmly embraces industrial policy (Draghi, 2024), shows the way forward also (and, given their earlier stages of development, especially) for its candidate countries. Accordingly, they should move beyond the low-tax, low-wage and low-value-added model by expanding public investment in infrastructure and the green transition, supporting productive

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domestic firms through industrial and innovation policies, and focusing on higher-quality FDI. The EU can support this through greater financial assistance and stronger support for innovation and technological upgrading. The EU could also consider co-financing return fellowships, employer-linked training, and other time-bound circular-mobility schemes that connect diaspora expertise with institutions and firms in candidate countries.

Public services and working conditions have to be improved as well, thus also strengthening skills and productive capacity. The EU can help through financial and technical support, as well as by giving social and employment reforms greater weight in the accession process. Higher incomes alone are unlikely to reduce emigration substantially if healthcare and education remain weak and employment remains insecure. Candidate countries ought to invest more in education and healthcare, not only through higher spending, but also through better management, quality standards, staff retention and fairer access across regions. More tailored support for low-income households, children and vulnerable groups is needed. Working conditions must be improved by strengthening labor inspection, reducing informality, supporting collective bargaining and making workers' rights more enforceable in practice, including by lifting the long-term unemployed out of precarity through better matching, reskilling, and other active labor market policies (Jovanovic et al., 2025). The gender aspect is also crucial, as expanded access to affordable childcare and long-term care remains the best way to reduce the gender employment gap.

Finally, institutions need to be made more functional, transparent and merit-based. The EU can support this by applying more consistent and substantive conditionality, focusing on actual implementation rather than formal legal changes, and providing direct support to independent institutions and civil society. Without stronger institutions, additional investment and economic growth will not necessarily translate into greater trust, better opportunities or lower emigration. Candidate countries must improve institutional efficiency, reduce clientelism, strengthen anti-corruption reforms, and ensure that access to jobs, public services and opportunities depends on skills and performance rather than party links or personal connections. A key mechanism in this regard is the strengthening of the independence, resources and accountability of oversight bodies, anti-corruption agencies, audit institutions and judicial councils, which must show visible results especially in high-level cases. Another important and relatively feasible step is to simplify administrative procedures and expand digital public services, so that citizens and firms depend less on personal contacts and discretionary decisions.

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Energy Transition

Alexandra Prodromidou (SEERC)

Problem diagnosis

GEO-POWER-EU data collected through focus groups with stakeholders from public administration and social partners in five countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Serbia, and Ukraine – corroborate existing literature on the challenges posed by the green transition in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. Across the case studies, the focus groups' findings demonstrate that the energy transition in these countries is a deeply structural and multi-dimensional process, shaped by the interaction between domestic constraints and EU-driven dynamics.

Despite having progressed at varying speeds and to differing degrees in adopting national green agendas and integrating with the Energy Community, these countries face unintended consequences of the transition, including significant societal and economic challenges related to energy poverty, competitiveness, security, and socioeconomic vulnerability. Thus, while EU market access can act as a powerful driver for reform through regulatory standards and economic incentives, creating opportunities for integration and energy security, it can also create asymmetries and tensions, as externally driven policies often lack domestic ownership and generate uneven impacts.

Results from the focus group discussions highlighted that energy dependence on fossil fuel imports is of particular geopolitical importance for energy security in both the Western Balkans and EaP accession countries, though in different ways. In the Western Balkans, energy imports remain at relatively modest levels of around 25% – except for Serbia with 42.60% of energy imports (International Energy Agency, 2023d) and Kosovo with 38.50% of energy imports (International Energy Agency, 2023b). A decrease in the use of mostly locally sourced coal during the coal phase-out, without accounting for the negative consequences of the green transition in the region, could significantly impact several countries by increasing energy imports and, in turn, external energy dependency.

In the EaP, energy import dependency among accession-track countries is far more pronounced, with the notable exception of Ukraine (currently at war with its traditional energy supplier,

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Russia). The high level of energy imports observed in Moldova with 81.20% (International Energy Agency, 2023c) energy imports and Georgia with 79.90% energy imports (International Energy Agency, 2023a) highlights a vulnerability shared across much of the region. Any EU energy security-related action or inaction in the EaP needs to take these specific vulnerabilities into account.

Project data from the focus groups suggest that while closer integration with European energy markets is regarded as beneficial, there are concerns regarding unequal adjustment costs and the capacity of domestic industries and institutions to comply with increasingly demanding regulatory requirements. An accelerated EU accession process that leaves key instruments, such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), unrevised would widen power imbalances between older and newer member states and reduce the economic competitiveness of new member states (Daheim et al. 2025, p. 19).

Research findings also indicate local constraints to fully adapting to the Green Agenda. These include governance deficits – such as weak institutions, limited administrative capacity, and corruption – as well as significant distributional effects, as the costs and benefits of the transition are unevenly allocated across regions and social groups, exacerbating energy poverty and vulnerability. Inefficient housing, decaying infrastructure, reduced subsidies, rising inequality, and low incomes are among the main parameters sustaining and reproducing energy poverty and insecurity in the two regions studied.

The cost of business as usual or no enlargement

Enlargement stagnation and a lack of policy adaptation would have a significant impact, resulting in fragmented engagement by candidate countries with EU policies, driven strictly by their immediate national interests and needs. This, in turn, would lead to the selective application of EU green transition policies across the two regions, compromising the overall sustainability of the transition process.

According to a foresight study by Daheim et al. (2025, p. 18), if EU enlargement stalls, it will negatively impact the EU's competitiveness. Similarly, the economic competitiveness of candidate states will decrease without revisions to crucial instruments, such as the CBAM – needed to offset unequal adjustment costs between accession countries and EU member states – or without a substantial increase in EU funding.

Crucially, bilateral energy agreements with third-party geopolitical actors will become an attractive alternative for accession countries, especially for highly import-dependent states such

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as Moldova and Georgia. In such a scenario, the spread of corrosive capital in the energy sector would present an even greater geopolitical challenge for the EU (see Prelec et al. 2025).

Finally, under this scenario, green infrastructure investment is expected to focus predominantly on power generation to reduce external supply dependencies, while decarbonisation in other sectors will stall. Meanwhile, the private sector in candidate countries will drive most greening operations – primarily to reduce energy costs – and generate the bulk of green innovation (Daheim, 2025, p.18). Consequently, vulnerable groups, including minorities, impoverished populations, and women, will remain acutely exposed to energy poverty.

Consequently, maintaining a business-as-usual approach or abandoning enlargement will lead to a stalled or fragmented green transition, with severe consequences for both the EU and candidate countries.

Operationalizing Gradual Integration – Policy implications

Accelerate market integration, decarbonisation and energy sector reform in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership accession countries through enhanced financial support, targeted investment, capacity building, and simplified EU funding mechanisms.

The EU should design energy transition programmes around integrated funding cycles that combine infrastructure investments with technical assistance. This approach ensures capacity-building activities are directly linked to the planning, implementation, and maintenance of specific energy projects, while remaining embedded in multilevel governance arrangements that foster coordination among national authorities, local governments, financiers, and utilities. Although candidate countries receive significant pre-accession assistance, this funding remains well below the levels provided to EU member states. Through a structured, gradual integration approach, candidate states should gain phased access to EU climate action instruments and Cohesion Policy funds to bridge this investment gap prior to full accession.

Expand storage capacity, support the power grid and diversify energy supply.
There is a need to expand storage capacity, electricity interconnections and production of renewable energy in order to diversify energy supply. This is particularly important for the candidate countries, which have high energy import dependence.

Integrate governance strengthening into the energy transition by addressing structural socio-economic vulnerabilities, enhancing institutional capacity, and improving governance effectiveness to support a fair, inclusive, and sustainable transition.

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Energy procurement must match EU standards, with funding tied to clear anti-corruption and transparency benchmarks. Furthermore, candidate countries should be supported in developing harmonised data systems and indicator frameworks to identify and monitor energy-vulnerable households and support them throughout the transition.

Strengthen resilience to the geopolitical challenges of the green energy transition by enhancing energy security, leveraging access to the EU Single Market as a driver for transformation, and advancing alignment with EU integration processes and standards.

There is a pressing need to expand storage capacity, electricity interconnections, and renewable energy generation to diversify the energy supply. This is particularly important for the candidate countries with high energy import dependencies. Recent data indicate that electricity-storage deployment across the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership remains limited but is accelerating. Serbia has more than 2 GW/5.9 GWh of battery projects in the grid-connection pipeline, while Albania is developing a 100 MW/400 MWh battery system and assessing the 1.62 GW Moglicë pumped-storage project, with an indicative storage volume of approximately 30 GWh (Balkan Battery Day, 2026). Likewise, in the Eastern Partnership, a 225 MW/450 MWh Ukrainian battery project is designed to provide balancing services to the Ukraine–Moldova control block (Energy Community, 2026). As most regional assets are planned or under developed rather than operational, regional reporting and EU support should clearly distinguish installed capacity, projects in the development pipeline, and long-term technical potential.

Offset CBAM costs through faster regulatory alignment

Compliance costs related to the CBAM should be mitigated by directing existing funding instruments towards the candidate countries. An accelerated accession-negotiations model could be instrumental in this context, especially in advancing alignment with EU regulatory processes and standards.

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A Principled Membership Framework

Panagiota Manoli (University of the Peloponnese)

The geopolitical imperative for the EU's enlargement, on the one hand, and the difficulties in granting candidate countries full membership, on the other, have generated a debate on membership options, ranging from full membership with derogations and safeguards to alternative integration models. Suggested models of accession attempt to address a persistent trilemma at the heart of EU enlargement (Manoli et al., 2025: 56). This is how to strike a balance between three frequently conflicting goals: the EU's geopolitical interests, the advancement of integration itself, and respect for the merit-based accession concept. A key instrument for resolving the trilemma is the accession treaties. The key policy question today, thus, is not only 'when accession will take place' but also 'what the accession treaties will include'.

Furthermore, the discussion on the enlargement models increasingly reflects concerns not only on how gradual integration is to precede membership, but also whether models of integration other than full membership may, in the end, produce differentiated forms of political belonging; a concentric EU.

The option of **full membership** builds on the legally established model, under which compliance with the Copenhagen criteria and the EU acquis grants new members full integration, rights, and obligations. Still, full membership is an ideal type, as it historically comes with permanent (opt-outs) or transitional derogations and safeguard mechanisms permitted by EU treaties and defined in treaties of accession. The emerging debate over future accession treaties reveals a growing tension between the need to protect the Union's institutional capacity and the principle of equality among member states. Central to the current policy debate is the June 2026 non-paper presented by France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. The non-paper advocates a common model for future accession treaties that combines enhanced safeguards with novel mechanisms to monitor and address rule-of-law backsliding. A key aspect of disagreement among current member states is the non-paper's proposal for potentially temporary limitations on the voting rights of new member states (The New Union Post, 2026a). The 'Friends of the Western Balkans' (consisting of Austria, Croatia, the Czech

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Republic, Greece, Italy, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary) have opposed this latter approach on institutional limitations, while supporting objective, proportionate, temporary, and country-specific safeguards (Agence Europe, 2026). The disagreement, therefore, is over the constitutional reach of safeguards and possible derogations rather than over the necessity of their inclusion in the new model of accession treaties: i.e., whether they should regulate the application of EU policies and obligations, as in previous enlargements, or bear institutional implications on member states' rights. This distinction is key to the shaping of the next enlargement model.

While differentiated and gradual integration may facilitate accession and protect the Union's functioning, differentiating core political rights risks creating a form of 'derogatory' membership that would lead to lasting discrimination and a status of 'second-class membership', with repercussions for public sentiment and policy efficiency. Linked to that are also constitutional concerns, as the unity, effectiveness, and coherence of the European legal order may be jeopardised (Fekete, 2026).

A second strand of discussion has developed on **alternative integration options** varying from a Reverse Enlargement (Liboreiro and de la Baume, 2026) option (proposed by the Commission but rejected by the member states) to a Nominated Member State option (Emerson and Blockmans, 2025) and Associate Membership (The New Union Post, 2026b) option as a basis for accession addressing geopolitical urgencies and realities. Alternative integration models may offer political membership (in the case of reverse enlargement, even if not all criteria are met). In contrast, full integration, rights, and obligations are extended to newcomers over time. Other models offer full policy and funding access, but only observer status in EU institutions (Nominated Member State), or a gradual application of EU law and budget obligations, security guarantees, and observer status in EU institutions, with snap-back mechanisms to revoke privileges (Associate Membership) before full membership. Still, not all member states support anything less than a merit-based full membership. The legal and structural feasibility of alternative integration models has been questioned. In contrast, these models, though they could promptly enhance the geopolitical and security imprint of enlargement, do not address the problem of the predictability of the finalité of membership.

What enlargement finalité?

The EU faces three interrelated challenges regarding its future enlargement. First, it must make the pre-accession process credible and geopolitically relevant, especially since most candidate countries will remain on the pre-accession path for some time. Second, it must address the institutional and decision-making challenges that would arise from the accession of new

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members (as some countries are closest to membership, notably Montenegro and Albania). Third, it must determine how to integrate countries with unresolved territorial conflicts and in particular address Ukraine's membership while the country remains at war.

The emerging policy debate points towards an enhanced gradual accession model, combined with internal EU reforms, particularly in decision-making, as a potential framework for addressing these challenges. The future finalité of enlargement will depend on two parallel trajectories: the evolution of pre-accession towards a more gradual or staged model of integration and transformation, both horizontally and for individual candidates; and member states' preferences regarding the EU's future political form, ranging from continued integration along the current path to a more concentric model based on differentiated membership.

Ukraine presents a distinct challenge for the EU's enlargement. The country's size, reconstruction needs, distinct political and institutional features, and conditions can largely be addressed by drawing on previous EU policy experience. However, the security (wartime) context of Ukraine's accession constitutes an unprecedented challenge for the Union. Accession during wartime would require policy and institutional arrangements beyond previous enlargement practice.

A new generation of Accession Treaties

There is currently no consensus among member states on fundamental changes to EU membership status. There is, however, growing recognition that the next enlargement will require a new generation of accession treaties incorporating significant transitional arrangements. These treaties will provide the legal framework for managing the transition to an enlarged Union while broader EU Treaty reform is pursued.

Although alternative institutional options may be offered for partner countries or countries that have no accession perspective reflecting specific strategic priorities, in the case of membership the EU must reject institutional discrimination and adopt a Principled Membership Framework. The future enlargement model will need to address three interrelated challenges: policy and sector-specific concerns of member and candidate countries; institutional challenges affecting EU decision-making and representation; and the protection of EU rules and values, particularly the rule of law. Accession treaties will also need to address domestic political concerns in member states and make enlargement politically feasible. A single yet flexible framework that can adapt to country-specific circumstances is needed, given the heterogeneity of future members.

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Safeguards will be key pillars of the next generation of accession treaties. Safeguards traditionally serve to balance the EU's strategic interests with the need to uphold its fundamental values and ensure the Union's integrity and policy coherence. Thus, the key question, today, is not whether safeguards are unprecedented—they are not—but what they protect and what they restrict. Three categories can be distinguished. *Integration safeguards* that build on established practice by temporarily limiting the application of particular policies, sectors, or acquis obligations. *Compliance safeguards* that include post-accession monitoring, rule-of-law conditionality, suspension of specific benefits, and non-regression mechanisms. These safeguards would extend current practice while respecting the equal status of member states. *Institutional safeguards,* by contrast, would bend the equal-status principle by creating institutional asymmetries through temporary restrictions on voting rights or representation in EU institutions following accession. These safeguards would represent a qualitative departure from previous enlargement practice, as they could create differentiated rights between old and new member states.

Unlike previous enlargements, the primary purpose of transitional arrangements is increasingly to protect the Union against post-accession backsliding that could undermine its capacity to act, rather than to provide new members with time to adjust to the acquis. What the EU needs is a single but flexible framework of principled accession to address these challenges without becoming a 'shopping list' of integration options, derogations, and safeguards. A **Principled Membership Framework** should serve:

- **A Long-term Vision** of a cohesive, adaptable EU prepared for further integration and capacity to act.
- **The Core Values** of the EU, which should be placed first, with an emphasis on upholding democracy and the rule of law.
- **An Equal Standing** of member states, where new members join as full, equal members from the start; to this end, communication and stakeholder engagement for political support should be treated strategically.
- **Integration and Policy Coherence**; limited transitional arrangements as facilitators of integration and clear, proportional and reversible safeguards for policy coherence without creating permanent discrimination.

The framework's core premise would be to square the EU's enlargement with effective governance and integration while preserving the statutory principle of equality among member states. Under a Principled Membership Framework, newcomers would join the Union as legally equal members from the moment of admission, whilst being subject to **clearly defined,**

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temporary and proportionate transitional arrangements. These measures would automatically terminate as specified post-accession conditions are fulfilled.

Equal Standing. New members should enjoy the same rights and institutional participation under the Treaties. Institutional reforms necessary to prevent decision-making paralysis—including mechanisms based on the principle of sincere cooperation under Article 4(3) TEU—should apply equally to all member states rather than selectively restricting the rights of newcomers. Safeguards should protect the EU's democratic and legal order without establishing permanent discrimination. Institutional safeguards should be excluded as they risk fostering further divisions and undermining the credibility and cohesion of the Union. It is nevertheless doubtful whether they would be sufficient to enhance public support for enlargement.

Transitional Arrangements and Safeguards. Temporary differentiation may be necessary, but it should not obscure the final destination of full integration on an equal basis. Previous enlargements provide an extensive toolkit of safeguards and transitional arrangements, including a General economic safeguard clause, a Single Market safeguard clause, and a Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) clause. Today's concerns about democracy and European security call for additional safeguards in the EU's internal security and the rule of law, while monitoring and compliance mechanisms should likewise be strengthened. The duration of country-specific safeguards is particularly important and should be kept limited, as they should not be treated as open-ended political clauses.

Derogation is essential to accommodate national sovereignty concerns and integration realities, and to allay short-term worries of European citizens that could halt enlargement. However, excessive or poorly managed derogations risk undermining the EU's core values and integration dynamics. They may be used to postpone or avoid implementing difficult reforms, especially in areas such as the rule of law, judicial independence, or human rights. Although they are country-specific, they should be enclosed within a principled framework, be reversible, subject to strict oversight, and include clear time limits with sunset clauses to prevent indefinite exemptions.

Security Challenges. Accession treaties should address the contemporary security environment to protect the integrity of the Union, including from cyber-attacks, hybrid threats, and foreign interference. Specific provisions and commitments (including possible measurable obligations) on compliance and mutual trust would ensure that new members contribute to the EU's collective security while respecting its values and strategic interests.

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Membership should ultimately be the end of a structured pre-accession convergence phase, during which candidates progressively participate in EU policies and programs as they meet clearly defined conditions. The EU's internal reforms, conducted in parallel with enlargement, will ensure that the Union can make decisions efficiently and act as a geopolitical actor both before and after accession. An effective EU27+ will eventually require deeper political integration and reforms applying equally to all its members.

Decoupling Membership from Security Guarantees

A distinct approach is required for Ukraine. EU membership and post-war security guarantees should be treated as two legally and politically separate tracks. Ukraine's accession to the EU should remain governed by Article 49 TEU, the Copenhagen criteria, and the conditions established during the accession process, rather than serving as a security guarantee itself. Security guarantees should instead be formed through a distinct, binding coalition arrangement, linked to a future peace or ceasefire agreement. This would allow the EU, on the one hand, to pursue a credible accession perspective for Ukraine and, on the other hand, to address its immediate and longer-term security needs through instruments specifically designed for that purpose.

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Conclusion – Policy Recommendations

The EU decided in 2022 to reinvigorate its enlargement policy and decisively advance the integration of candidate countries. Yet, it has so far failed to translate words into deeds, largely due to disagreements among member states across three key issues:

1. Amid widespread paralysis in accession negotiations driven by the misuse of veto powers, the Council remains divided on whether to move away from decision-making by unanimity.
2. While the EU has committed to the gradual integration of candidate countries, it has yet to articulate a clear blueprint that prioritises specific reforms and ties them directly to intermediate rewards.
3. Despite agreeing to pursue internal reforms in parallel with enlargement, member states are locked in a debate over strict institutional safeguards and alternative integration models—a dynamic that threatens the credibility of the full membership promise.

Building on a two-year collective research effort involving 109 semi-structured elite interviews, a public opinion survey across nine (potential) candidate countries, and 20 focus groups, this study addresses each of these challenges and offers the following policy recommendations:

1. Adopt the three-track decision-making model at all intermediate stages of accession negotiations

To give accession negotiations new impetus and restore the credibility of EU enlargement policy, the Council should reform its routine decision-making procedures by adopting a three-track model. Rather than applying unanimity across all intermediate stages or remaining deadlocked in unending talks over a shift to Qualified Majority Voting (QMV), the Council should align its decision-making procedures with the distinct functional roles it performs across negotiation clusters and chapters:

- **Constitutional-Sovereignty Track (Cluster 1, Cluster 6, Chapters 34 & 35):** Council decisions should be taken at all intermediate stages via Reinforced Qualified Majority Voting (ReQMV), supplemented by an emergency brake mechanism. If a member state opposes adopting a decision for vital and stated reasons of national policy, the matter

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would be referred to the European Council for a decision by consensus, preserving member states' right to defend vital national interests.

- **Accession Terms and Conditions Track (Cluster 5):** Considering that negotiations on resources, agriculture, and cohesion centre on redistributive bargaining over transitional periods and budgetary allocations, the Council should decide at all intermediate stages via ReQMV, without the backing of an emergency brake.
- **Regulatory Alignment Track (Clusters 2, 3 & 4):** In policy fields where EU legislation is extensive and the Council acts primarily as a regulatory evaluator, decisions at all intermediate stages should be taken via Reversed Qualified Majority Voting (RQMV), under which the Commission's recommendation is deemed adopted unless the Council rejects it within 90 days. However, if substantive deviations from the acquis are requested, an interest safeguard clause would apply, requiring the Council to take that specific decision via ReQMV.

The three-track reform model does not require a Treaty amendment, nor does it alter the distribution of powers under Article 49 TEU. Its implementation requires only a horizontal, unanimous Council decision, followed by revisions to candidate countries' Negotiating Frameworks. By recognising the right of member states to defend vital national interests on sensitive issues while removing routine vetoes on regulatory alignment and on accession terms and conditions, the model provides a workable compromise that increases the transparency, predictability, and fairness of accession negotiations.

2. Operationalise the gradual integration approach and support, as a matter of priority, the efforts of candidate countries to address the following four challenges:

- Strengthen the rule of law:
  - **Create rule-of-law baseline reports.** The European Commission should commission independent rule-of-law baseline reports for each (potential) candidate country to set out a baseline against which progress can be measured and to provide targeted recommendations for priority actions.
  - **Rebalance the fundamentals cluster.** Give the procurement chapter of the fundamentals cluster (chapter 5) the same weight as other rule-of-law elements of the acquis and prioritise and apply its benchmarks transparently to infrastructure and investment projects in candidate countries. This would help reduce the potential for corruption while supporting institutional resilience against further state capture facilitated by EU member states.

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- **Offer access to Cohesion Funds, conditioned on rule-of-law progress.** IPA is useful but too small and weakly targeted; cohesion funds are an order of magnitude larger and would make reform rewards politically visible. Tied to fundamentals-cluster milestones and channelled through appropriate monitoring mechanisms, this would convert the strongest available carrot into a rule-of-law instrument.
- **Publish a benchmark-to-benefit map.** Make explicit and clearly explain which rule-of-law milestones unlock which market, funding, or institutional-participation right.
- **Reduce the discretionary component of conditionality.** Tie each phase-in benefit to specific rule-of-law benchmarks which trigger a granting of that benefit on achievement of the benchmark, and a recommendation by the European Commission to suspend a candidate's benefits in response to regression.
- **Verify benchmarks independently.** The European Commission should rely more on independent monitoring than on governmental self-reporting in decision-making on rule-of-law issues, mirroring the baseline reports. Government failures should be communicated transparently, particularly to citizens of candidate countries, to enable them to hold their elected representatives accountable.
- **Deliver a defined share of rule-of-law assistance below the central government.** Increase funding for local authorities, justice institutions, and civil society to counter the effects of empowering incumbent elites.
- **Fundamentally decentralise support to civil society organisations.** Increase funding for civil society capacity-building by supporting incubator initiatives to expand the roster of independent organisations capable of providing external rule-of-law monitoring and competing for/managing EU funds. A study to develop this approach should be commissioned immediately to implement the new civil society support strategy by July 2027.

- <u>Align with and contribute to the CFSP:</u>
  - **Create a Roadmap for the Security, Defence, and Preparedness Convergence of every candidate:** The European Commission should set up roadmaps for each candidate country, linking monitoring across Clusters 1 and 6 to reinforce rule-of-law conditionality. These roadmaps should designate benchmarks in the

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following areas: security sector governance, defense readiness in line with NATO standards, strategic alignment, and societal preparedness.

- **Use gradual defence integration to reward progress in implementing the roadmaps:** Candidate countries registering progress under the roadmaps should move into progressively deeper stages of defence integration. Early compliance could lead to action plans for training, capability development, and closer ties with PESCO and the European Defense Agency. Further progress could open up observer access to CSDP formats along with substantial industrial and financial rewards, including EPF funding, joint procurement, and access to European defense supply chains.
- **Finance under the next MFF, the strengthening of civic infrastructure, independent media, and civil society watchdogs in candidate countries to ensure rising defense** expenditures face proper public scrutiny. Crucially, maintain the process reversible, as it happened when democratic backsliding led to the suspension of Georgia's EPF funds.

- <u>Foster economic convergence and curb brain drain:</u>
  - **Frontload Membership Benefits:** The EU should expedite accession negotiations where possible, and grant candidate countries early access to EU funds and the Single Market to accelerate convergence before full membership. The prioritisation of early economic integration would provide young people with opportunities at home, directly addressing the severe pre-accession brain drain in the region.
  - **Support a New Growth Model:** The EU should provide greater financial assistance and targeted support for innovation, infrastructure, and green technology to candidate countries. In this way, it will help them shift away from the current low-tax, low-wage development models. The pre-accession policy should align with the 2024 Draghi report's focus on industrial strategy to help candidates attract higher-quality FDI and close income gaps.
  - **Prioritise Social and Employment Reforms:** The EU should give social, healthcare, and labour market reforms greater weight in the accession process and back the candidate countries' efforts with technical and financial aid. To make economic growth sustainable and reduce emigration, the EU should prioritise strengthening workers' rights, reskilling the unemployed, and expanding access to childcare.

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- **Demand efficient, transparent and merit-based institutions:** The EU should apply conditionality more consistently. Rather than settling for procedural compliance, it must demand substantial reforms from candidate countries. The EU should also offer greater financial support to judicial councils, civil society, and independent oversight bodies. Finally, the EU should insist on clear results against corruption and the quick rollout of transparent, digital public services.
- **Create an EU–Candidate Skills Retention and Circular Mobility Facility**: The EU should co-finance return fellowships, employer-linked training, and other time-bound circular-mobility schemes that connect diaspora expertise with institutions and firms in candidate countries.

- <u>Advance the green energy transition:</u>
  - **Grant phased access to EU structural funds:** Candidate countries currently receive pre-accession support at levels far below those of member states. Phased access to EU climate action instruments and Cohesion Policy funds will help bridge this investment gap before full accession, especially if infrastructure spending and technical support are delivered together in single funding cycles.
  - **Link energy reform to anti-corruption and social safeguards:** Accession funding for energy procurement needs to depend strictly on meeting anti-corruption benchmarks. At the same time, the EU must help candidate countries build harmonized data systems so governments can identify and protect vulnerable households throughout the transition.
  - **Expand storage capacity and grid interconnections:** The EU needs to target assistance toward candidate countries with high import dependencies so they can rapidly scale up renewables, battery storage, and cross-border power links. Building out this physical infrastructure is vital to diversifying energy supplies and shore up regional security.
  - **Offset CBAM costs through faster regulatory alignment:** Existing EU funding instruments should be redirected toward candidate countries to cushion the financial impact of CBAM compliance. Using accelerated negotiation tracks will also help candidate states align their energy rules with EU market standards much faster.
  - Establish a Regional Electricity Storage and Flexibility Facility: The EU and the Energy Community should create a dedicated facility to aggregate project pipelines, provide feasibility and grid-integration support, and offer blended

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finance or guarantees for storage projects in the Western Balkans, Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. Priority should be given to projects that provide cross-border balancing, reduce import exposure and can demonstrate transparent procurement and measurable system benefits.

  - Apply energy-security and integrity screening to EU-supported projects: Financing decisions should assess supplier concentration, cybersecurity, foreign control of critical infrastructure, lifecycle dependence on proprietary technologies and exposure to corrosive capital. Large generation, storage and interconnection projects should publish ownership, procurement and beneficial-ownership information, while funding agreements should include corrective-action and suspension clauses.

Above all, the Commission should publish an annual country-by-country **scoreboard** to monitor progress in implementing **gradual integration**. This tool would track verified reforms, unlocked benefits, and any applied reversals across candidates. An aggregate scoreboard with comparative information for all candidate countries would highlight any double standards and allow parliaments, civil society, and citizens to assess whether gradual integration yields tangible results.

3. Propose to candidate countries a Principled Membership Framework

A Principled Membership Framework should guide the design of future accession treaties and be built around three recommendations:

- **Preserve full legal equality.** New members should not face limits on their voting rights or institutional representation as a condition of joining. Where governance reforms are needed to prevent decision-making paralysis, they should apply across the board — not be dressed up as accession conditions aimed only at newcomers.
- **Use temporary, time-limited and proportionate safeguards:** The EU should expand the traditional single-market and internal-security safeguard clauses to cover areas such as rule-of-law backsliding. Still, any such expansion needs a firm sunset clause built in. Without one, ‘temporary’ safeguards risk hardening into a permanent second-class membership status.
- **Keep Ukraine’s EU accession and security guarantees on separate tracks:** Ukraine’s EU accession path should remain distinct from efforts to address its post-war security needs. The country’s need for security commitments will be better handled through a

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dedicated, legally binding coalition agreement than by bending the standard accession framework to fit an unprecedented case.

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