

Beyond the EPC: Gradual Integration and Consistent Oversight for an Enlarged Union

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1. Introduction

With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, **EU enlargement** has become a hotly debated topic again. While the EU has attracted new members since the 1970s, its continuous growth has stopped since 2013. As the world became more complicated, so did EU enlargement.¹ By now, there are numerous challenges preventing the accession of new members, including economic disparities between potential and actual member states as well as internal tensions within candidate countries and within the EU. In May 2022, the French President Emmanuel Macron introduced the idea of the **European Political Community (EPC)** - a platform to foster cooperation across Europe, including between EU member states and candidate countries.² Since then, people have wondered whether the EPC would be the key to unlock further enlargement. We argue that **the EPC cannot solve the challenge of further EU enlargement**, primarily because the EPC is simply not designed to address this issue. Instead, we give **three specific policy recommendations** for how the EU could actually unlock the potential of further enlargement.

Misalignment of Goals

The EPC cannot solve the challenge of further enlargement predominantly for one reason: **It is simply not designed to deal with it**. First of all, **the EPC does not have the mandate to promote internal reforms in membership candidates**, as the EPC is not built to implement any concrete programme in support of such policies.³ Yet, internal reforms are critical for EU accession. Secondly, the EPC includes a diverse set of countries with varying interests and priorities, which complicates consensus-building. In fact, **it includes countries not interested in joining the EU**, such as the UK and Norway. This creates a misalignment with the goals of EU enlargement. Unlike the EU, the EPC was never officially intended to support accession; its broader mission focuses on cooperation in areas like security and energy.

Perception as a Stalling Mechanism

As a result, **the EPC seems like a merely symbolic institution** created for the sake of delaying enlargement plans. Thus, some candidate countries fear that the EPC might act as a

¹ T. A. Börzel, F. Schimmelfennig, *Beyond enlargement: The EU's eastern partnership after the Russian invasion of Ukraine*. Journal of European Public Policy, 30(1), 1-15, 2023.

² S. Blockmans, S. Russack, *The European Political Community: What role for the EU?* Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), 2023.

³ N. Font, *Beyond enlargement: The European Political Community and the EU's capacity for external differentiated integration*. Journal of European Public Policy, 2023.

substitute for EU membership rather than a stepping stone toward it.⁴ This skepticism is compounded by statements emphasizing the EPC's broader cooperative goals, which are not explicitly linked to accession. In essence, **the EPC is unable to provide a clear and direct path to EU membership**. If candidate countries perceive the EPC as a diversion, their willingness to pursue necessary reforms for EU membership could diminish. This dynamic risks eroding the core motivation for political and economic alignment with EU standards, potentially stalling the accession process further. Even worse, it could cause democratic backsliding and economic trouble in the EU's direct neighborhood - creating instability and insecurity.

Going Beyond the EPC

While structurally changing the EPC to include mechanisms for tangible outcomes might address some of these problems, the issue runs deeper. As already mentioned, the EPC was never designed to serve as an enlargement tool. Its informal, dialogue-driven nature makes it unsuitable for supporting the systematic reforms or meeting the benchmarks required for EU membership. This mismatch between the EPC's design and candidate countries' expectations creates a significant gap that cannot be bridged without fundamentally altering its purpose. Therefore, we argue that **the EPC cannot solve the challenge of further EU enlargement, which calls for new and different solutions**.

2. Current EU policies and attempts to tackle enlargement challenges

Before considering which measures would be able to solve the challenge of further EU enlargement, we must first understand how the EU has tried to approach this issue so far.

Copenhagen Criteria⁵

A cornerstone of the EU's enlargement strategy is the **Copenhagen Criteria**, which establish the conditions and principles that all aspiring member states must meet. Adopted in 1993, these criteria span three critical areas:

- **political**: ensuring stable democratic governance, the protection of human rights, and adherence to the rule of law;
- **economic**: establishing a functional market economy capable of competing within the EU's internal market;
- **institutional**: demonstrating the ability to adopt and effectively implement the EU's *acquis communautaire*.

⁴ B. Martill, M. Sus, *The European Political Community: Complementing or Competing with EU Enlargement?* Journal of Common Market Studies, 2023.

⁵ European Parliament, *The Copenhagen Criteria for EU Membership*.

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/167/the-copenhagen-criteria-for-eu-membership>).

These criteria are fundamental to preserving the **EU's core values** during enlargement. However, they often prove highly demanding for candidate countries, many of which struggle with weak institutions, widespread corruption, and significant economic underdevelopment.⁶ These obstacles complicate compliance and make progress arduous. Additionally, as mentioned above, the absence of incremental rewards for partial achievements dampens the motivation for reforms.

Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP)

To address these challenges, the EU has implemented the **Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA)**,⁷ which provides financial and technical support to help candidate countries align with EU standards. The IPA focuses on key areas such as governance reforms, infrastructure development, and capacity building in public administration.

Despite its utility, the IPA has significant limitations. Its emphasis on meeting stringent conditional thresholds to unlock funding addresses the problem of rewarding progress. Yet, these thresholds can be excessively demanding, particularly for economically fragile countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, the IPA is often criticized for its short-term approach, which inadequately tackles long-term structural issues, such as income inequality and judicial inefficiency.

The **Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP)** is another critical instrument, specifically tailored to the Western Balkans.⁸ This process seeks to facilitate closer economic ties, political dialogue, and alignment with EU standards. It offers a defined pathway toward eventual membership, combining trade liberalization and financial assistance with reform incentives. However, the SAP has faced numerous obstacles, including political instability, unresolved conflicts, and governance deficits within the region. Furthermore, growing “enlargement fatigue” among EU member states has reduced the process's credibility,⁹ while external actors like Russia and China have leveraged delays to exert their influence in the region.

The European Neighbourhood Policy

⁶ P. Rezler, *the Copenhagen criteria: are they helping or hurting the european union?*, 2 November 2011 https://www.tourolaw.edu/ilr/uploads/articles/v14_2/5.pdf.

⁷ European Commission, *Overview - Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance* https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/overview-instrument-pre-accession-assistance_en.

⁸ H. Schenker, *The Stabilization and Association Process: An Engine of European Integration in Need of Tuning*, European Centre for Minority Issues, 2008. https://www.ecmi.de/fileadmin/redakteure/publications/JEMIE_Datens%C3%A4tze/Jemie-datens%C3%A4tze_2008/1-2008-Schenker.pdf.

⁹ Enlargement fatigue is the diminishing enthusiasm among EU member states for accepting new members, driven by concerns over economic costs, governance challenges, and institutional strain. This topic is widely discussed in the publication by Matteo Bonomi and Irene Rusconi titled *"From EU 'enlargement fatigue' to 'enlargement enthusiasm'?"* (Istituto Affari Internazionali, 05/10/2023), available here: <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/eu-enlargement-fatigue-enlargement-enthusiasm>.

The **European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)** complements these tools by fostering cooperation with countries on the EU's periphery, such as those in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and the southern Mediterranean.¹⁰ The ENP promotes governance reforms, economic partnerships, and energy security, with initiatives like the **Eastern Partnership (EaP)** strengthening EU influence in neighboring regions. However, unlike the SAP or IPA, the ENP does not provide a pathway to EU membership. Its focus on partnership rather than integration diminishes its appeal to countries seeking closer ties with the EU, particularly those aspiring to eventual accession. This limitation has restricted the ENP's relevance as a mechanism for addressing enlargement challenges.

Overall, while the EU's enlargement policies offer structured frameworks for engagement, their shortcomings - such as slow progress, rigid conditionality, and the absence of compelling interim incentives - hinder their effectiveness. These challenges highlight the need for a more adaptable and inclusive approach to enlargement to maintain momentum and support among candidate countries.

3. Policy recommendations

Thus, although the EU enlargement process has led to some success in the past, it now presents many challenges and shortcomings. In order to address these issues, we put forth a **three-pronged approach**. The first pillar of our proposal is the establishment of **a clear, gradual and credible path to EU accession**. Secondly, **more economic and technical support** needs to be provided to candidate countries. Finally, a stronger EU commitment to future enlargement needs to be coupled with **stricter conditionality¹¹ and closer monitoring** - before and after accession - to ensure that the considerable investment in candidate countries actually pays off over time. Our suggestions build on the existing EU enlargement framework, while invoking some crucial but realistic innovations. Several concrete policy measures are needed to implement this vision.

Recommendation 1: Closing Policy Chapters by QMV and Introducing Gradual Integration

First of all, to streamline the EU accession negotiation process, the EU could, through a simple administrative decision, **switch from unanimity to qualified majority voting (QMV)** when opening and closing each policy chapter.¹² Additionally, it should be possible

¹⁰ European Commission, *European Neighbourhood Policy. What is it?*.

https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/european-neighbourhood-policy_en.

¹¹ By stricter conditionality we do not necessarily mean that it will be more difficult for a candidate country to become a member state, but rather that specific EU-requested reforms would correspond to conditional benefits and advancements in the EU accession process.

¹² Currently, to open and close each policy chapter there is the need for a unanimity vote, but this rule is customary (Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), *Negotiating EU Enlargement: Scenarios for Future Integration*, 2024, <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/9788893683425.pdf>).

to **open new policy chapters even before closing the “Fundamentals” cluster**.¹³ Relatedly, the EU should allow for **partial integration steps after specific milestones and thresholds** are met. These could include economic – further trade integration, SEPA membership, joint energy sources purchases – or non-economic benefits – visa-free travel, roaming like-at-home services, SEPA membership – provided after the related policy chapters have been closed. A crucial step would be to develop security arrangements between the EU and the candidate country when full and reliable foreign policy alignment is achieved. These could go as far as extending provisions similar to the mutual defence clause (**Art. 42.7 TEU**) before EU accession. In a similar way, closing a specific policy chapter should also allow candidate countries to take part, ideally with an active role, in the respective EU agencies and programmes.

Recommendation 2: Enhancing the EU Presence in Candidate Countries

Secondly, **“EU Task Forces”** could be dispatched to candidate countries to support their quest for EU accession. With the permission of local authorities, these “EU Task Forces” should **provide technical support** to speed up the adoption of the EU acquis, **ensure on-the-ground monitoring and accountability**, and **make the EU feel more immediate** and accessible to candidate countries’ citizens. In terms of organizational structure, these task forces could either refer directly to their country-specific Unit within **DG-NEAR**,¹⁴ or they could be arranged under a new **“EU Agency for Enlargement”**. The former option would be easier to implement, while building on previous experience from DG-NEAR; conversely, the latter would provide a more centralized, independent and committed way of addressing the issues of EU enlargement. A possible solution integrating the benefits of both arrangements would be to set up an independent “EU Agency for Enlargement,” while ensuring a strict cooperation between on-the-ground agency officials and the personnel of the relevant DG-NEAR Units.

Recommendation 3: Strengthening Post-EU Accession Monitoring and Conditionality to Minimize Backsliding

Finally, EU policymakers should introduce a mechanism to ensure that new member states remain compliant with EU requirements, especially with respect to the rule of law. More specifically, an additional clause could be added to **Art. 7 of the TEU**,¹⁵ stating that, for a **temporary period** after EU accession, **new member states can be sanctioned for infringing on core EU values** just through a **qualified majority vote**, excluding all new

¹³ Currently, negotiations about any other chapter are subordinate to the Fundamentals chapter being closed (European Commission, *EU Enlargement in 2014 and Beyond: Progress and Challenges*, 8 October 2014, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_14_1100).

¹⁴ The Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations is organized along both functional and geographical lines, with some Units focusing solely on specific candidate countries (European Commission, *DG NEAR organisation chart*, 16 October 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/9a13971b-6e54-4743-b954-bb10f33b9a82_en).

¹⁵ Currently, by Art. 7 of the TEU, the European Council can determine that a member state has breached the core values of the EU, and can sanction it accordingly, only by unanimity, excluding the interested member state (Art. 7 TEU, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012M007>).

members. We suggest this temporary period to be between 7 and 10 years-long.¹⁶ This measure would ensure stronger conditionality for new EU member states, reducing the risk of a potential **institutional backsliding** after accession. This would also make it easier for existing member states to support enlargement. Since current EU member states would not be affected by this measure, they would likely back it. Moreover, since this rule would only be temporary, it would not infringe upon the EU “**equal membership**” criteria.¹⁷ We are also aware that this recommendation would require a modification of the EU Treaties.¹⁸ However, it seems clear that such a revision is necessary anyway and will probably take place in the next few years,¹⁹ thus creating a realistic opportunity to pass this specific proposal.

4. Conclusion

When Macron introduced the EPC in May 2022, he may have had many things in mind - but fully solving EU enlargement issues certainly was not one of them. As we have shown, **the EPC cannot solve the challenge of further EU enlargement, primarily because it is simply not designed to address this challenge.** After a review of how the EU has previously tried to tackle the challenges of enlargement, we proposed **three policy recommendations:** Closing Policy Chapters by QMV and Introducing Gradual Integration, Enhancing the EU Presence in Candidate Countries, and Strengthening Post-EU Accession Monitoring and Conditionality to Minimize Backsliding.

Each of these policies will provide tangible and clearly attainable interim benefits from pursuing the path of reforms needed for accession. Each will strengthen public confidence in the accession process within candidate countries and strengthen support for enlargement within the EU. Each will also ensure that, when a new “window of opportunity” opens within the EU, candidate countries are institutionally ready to successfully seize this opportunity. If implementing these recommendations, **the EU can unlock the potential of further enlargement without opening a Pandora’s box.**

¹⁶ These tentative periods of time are based on the democratic backsliding experience of Hungary and Poland, which started, respectively, around 7 and 10 years after EU accession.

¹⁷ F. Casolari. *Equality of States and Mutual Membership in European Union Law: Contemporary Reflections*. The Hague : T.M.C. Asser Press, 2023, <https://cris.unibo.it/handle/11585/904313>).

¹⁸ Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform, *Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century*, 18 September 2023, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2617206/4d0e0010ffcd8c0079e21329bbbb3332/230919-rfaa-de-u-fra-bericht-data.pdf>).

¹⁹ Foundation Robert Schuman, *Treaty revision: is Europe ready for a qualitative leap?*, 7 November 2023, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/european-issues/725-treaty-revision-is-europe-ready-for-a-qualitative-leap>).