
Preparing for the next
EU enlargement:

Tough choices ahead¹

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I Introduction: a new 1989

Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine has affected the geopolitics of the European continent like no event since 1989 and the end of Cold War.

Germany's post-war division ended in 1990, with US and Soviet consent to its reunification. A year later the Warsaw Pact was dissolved. NATO expanded. The twelve members of the European Community reshaped their club into a Union, endowing it with stronger institutions, a shared currency, and a foreign, security and defence policy.

Crucially, in 1993 the Union offered membership to most Central and Eastern European states. Enlargement was prepared internally with a series of Treaty changes, as well as budgetary and policy reforms. This enabled ten new states to join in 2004, eight of which had once been behind the Iron Curtain: the Visegrád quartet of Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary, the Baltic trio of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and one former Yugoslav republic, Slovenia.²

The geopolitical shock of 2022 has precipitated a similar response. NATO, which expanded in the spring of 2023 to include Finland and hopes to add Sweden, has ratcheted up its activity. The newly established European Political Community offers a regular forum for leaders of 40-plus states – from the Atlantic Ocean to the Black Sea – to discuss shared interests. The EU itself has taken far-reaching decisions, such as to supply Ukraine with weapons and to decouple from Russian gas. The next mission – just as after 1989 – is for the Union to open up to new members, not least Ukraine.

What makes EU enlargement a geostrategic imperative? Putin's 2022 invasion has altered the strategic map of the continent fundamentally. After 1989, the relationship between Europe and Russia allowed for grey or buffer zones. This was perhaps uncomfortable for countries like Ukraine, Moldova or Georgia, sandwiched between the two, but it was still viable. Since the 2022 war, however, such in-between spaces no longer exist. A hard strategic fault-line now cuts across the continent, with European states on one side and the Russian Federation and Belarus on the other. Only Turkey has the will and strength to preserve its neutrality. It is in the Union's strategic interest to firmly and definitively embed the states on 'our' side of that line into a secure home. The new historic situation has also altered the EU's strategic calculus for the Western Balkans. Keeping other geopolitical actors, such as Russia, China

or Saudi Arabia, out of this potentially unstable region has become a high priority.

Shortly after the invasion, the Ukrainian government formally announced its wish to become an EU member, which in turn reactivated the process for the six Western Balkans states currently in the accession waiting room. In June 2022 the European Council gave Ukraine and Moldova EU candidate status, while offering Georgia a 'European perspective'. It also reconfirmed its commitment vis-à-vis Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. This means the Union now needs to ready itself for the accession of up to nine new members: the six Balkan aspirants, plus Ukraine, Moldova and, perhaps, Georgia.

In addition, there is the unresolved issue of Turkey. Although still a candidate country, to all intents and purposes its accession talks with the EU remain frozen, and its EU entry is currently not part of the political debate. Turkey has therefore been set aside for the purpose of this paper. However, the Union will need to rethink and possibly deepen its relationship with this strategically important neighbour. This should not be confined to the framework of accession, which has led to frustrations on both sides.

Although the principle of further eastward enlargement has been formally endorsed, political reservations remain. It is beginning to dawn on EU leaders and on the wider public that the consequences of such enlargement could be monumental for the Union itself and its operation. In fact, without significant internal EU reform, it is hard to see how the accession of Ukraine and others is possible at all. It is not just candidate states that must prepare for membership. The EU has to be ready for expansion by the time of accession.

This paper identifies five areas where the transition from a Union of 27 to one of up to 36 members is likely to have a major impact on the EU's functioning, and where reform could be considered necessary. It then offers a few political considerations on timing, process and public support and concludes that the Union faces some incredibly tough challenges in the coming years, which it is by no means certain to overcome. Although many Europeans feel not including Ukraine and others is unacceptable in the current geopolitical context, the same is true of the reforms and sacrifices that accession will demand of the Union. Difficult choices lie ahead.

II Internal reform in five areas

1 Decision-making and institutions

Having more member states will inevitably alter the Union's institutional and political dynamics. It will impact all relationships at the core of EU decision-making: between the Union and its member states, between bigger and smaller countries, and among the EU institutions. Enlargement might strengthen the power of the Commission and its president. The seat allocation in the Parliament will require adjustment. In the Council, the thresholds for blocking minorities or winning majorities, and hence coalition options, will change. Finally, the benefits of veto power, in publicly binding all member states to joint decisions and thereby creating collective ownership, should be weighed carefully against the importance of the EU's capacity to decide and act. Simply abolishing vetoes is no panacea.

Although EU governments will each form their own view on these matters, their shared responsibility is to consider whether the Union will remain governable with nine additional members, and if not, what reforms are needed. Only then does the secondary question of whether such reforms would require a Treaty change come into play. Since the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, the EU has withstood a series of major shocks – the euro crisis, for example, and Brexit – without changing its institutional set-up. The obstacles to Treaty ratification in 27 national parliamentary and/or referendum procedures encouraged finding other, more pragmatic solutions.

Legally, the Lisbon Treaty can deal with future enlargements. It offers pathways to institutional reform to enhance governability. For instance, no new Treaty is needed to reduce the number of Commissioners to two thirds of the number of member states, if the European Council decides to do so unanimously.³ Certain vetoes in the Council can be abolished by means of 'passerelle' clauses.⁴ As for the EP, 31 of the UK's 73 vacated seats have been kept free for future enlargement and/or transnational lists. These would suffice for a few of the smaller entrants but not for Ukraine, which would get a number of seats comparable to Poland (52) or Spain (59). But there, too, solutions can be found within the current framework.⁵

The appetite for a full-blown constitutional Convention followed by Treaty change has been persistently low in many member states. There is currently no shared understanding among governments about the way forward. Ratification procedures, including referendums, are politically risky and time-consuming. The outcome of the endeavour, moreover, remains deeply uncertain until all countries have gone through their ratification process, since a single 'no' vote can block the whole process for years, or even indefinitely.

Nevertheless, a case can be made for limited Treaty changes that aim to preserve the Union's ability to protect its values and interests post-enlargement. During the euro crisis, the Union adopted one such 'surgical' amendment to the Treaty, which was ratified via a lighter procedure. This example offers a potential avenue for a more fundamental re-think of certain policies, if needed.

Finally, even without *formal* modifications to the institutional framework, things will not stay the same. Any significant increase in the EU's membership will result in *informal* changes to its governance, the balance of power in Brussels and decision-making. More member states increases the risk of fragmenting the bodies assembling national governments, i.e. the European Council and the Council of ministers, whereas it will bolster the agenda-setting power of the Commission and, within an ever larger college, its president. In this respect, the question is not whether the Union's functioning will change (it will) but whether and how this change is anticipated and agreed on, and results in effective and legitimate decision-making.

2 The EU budget, agriculture and cohesion policy

Enlargement will inevitably necessitate adjustments to the EU budget. On the revenue side, new members start contributing to the budget when they join. As this is a GDP-based amount and the new accession states are all relatively poor, a good number of the EU27's current net recipients will become net contributors, perhaps even all of them. On the expenditure side, enlargement will require a profound re-allocation of EU funds across members, in particular for the common agriculture policy (CAP) and cohesion policy.

With €378.5 billion in expenditure, the CAP accounts for 31% of the EU's budget for the period 2021–27 (the MFF). The majority of that budget (76.8%) takes the form of income support or direct payments to farmers, the level of which is calculated based on the amount of land they hold. Given that there will be substantially more farmland in an enlarged EU, the future of the CAP requires fundamental discussion. Ukraine alone has over 40 million hectares of farmland, more than the entire territory of Italy, and would become a major recipient of CAP funding. Logically, this means that either the pie grows and the overall budget for such support increases, or farmers each get a smaller slice of the pie and average payments per hectare decrease. Interim solutions are also conceivable. Ahead of the 2004 enlargement, the future agricultural budget was capped and a 10-year phasing-in process was introduced for new members until the existing level of CAP payments could be matched.

The Union's cohesion policy, which aims to foster socio-economic convergence, accounts for a similar portion of the MFF (€372.6 billion). Enlargement will significantly increase disparities among EU states and regions. In the Western Balkan countries, GDP per capita is less than half the EU average. In Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine (even before the invasion), the numbers are similar. In all cases, GDP per capita is lower than that of the poorest EU27 member, Bulgaria. The logic of cohesion policy is that funds would need to be re-targeted at the Union's new members, to the disadvantage of current beneficiaries, unless more EU revenues are raised for cohesion objectives. Again, either the overall budget must increase, or each gets a smaller slice. Of course, trade-offs between policy domains are also conceivable.

Making EU funding available outside the MFF, as was done with NextGenEU during the Covid pandemic, could help ease pressures on future MFF negotiations, although this would open up other budgetary and institutional questions, such as the matter of EU taxes. International financing of the post-war reconstruction of Ukraine, for instance by G7 partners, could likewise alleviate the burden. Nevertheless, for the EU, some hard budgetary choices will be required.

3 The single market, free movement and employment

Extending the single market and free movement to, possibly, another nine countries and up to 70 million more people is likely to create new economic opportunities and jobs, strengthen Europe's competitiveness and spur growth. In addition to more trade, stronger economies of scale and lower prices, enlargement also means greater access to critical raw materials and minerals, and therefore a more resilient Europe. However, these welfare gains are not likely to be distributed equally across all member states. Economic theory says increased trade flows should benefit the current EU neighbours of accession states most. But in certain markets, such as agriculture, the influx of lower-priced goods, crops and products could also hit local economies, leading to the closure of businesses and farms. Already, the decision to open the single market to Ukrainian grain has led to major tensions with Poland and other Eastern Europe countries.

Wage differentials between the EU27 and candidate countries are significant. Labour shortages exist within the Union and workers from new member states may fill some gaps in this respect, which would be welcome. But these differentials could, in the short term, also depress wage levels in the Union, have a corrosive effect on working conditions and foment societal and political discontent. In addition, countries joining the single market risk a brain-drain of young and talented people exiting the domestic economy to pursue better paid jobs elsewhere in the EU, even if many may ultimately return home.

For the 2004 enlargement, existing EU members had the option of maintaining restrictions on the free movement of people and on trade in services with new member states for up to seven years. Anticipating a sudden arrival of new workers, a dozen states chose to cushion their economy and labour markets against the change. Others, such as the UK, opted to open the door to labour migration from new members immediately, which became a critical issue in the Brexit referendum campaign. Similar transition mechanisms will no doubt be called for. Permanent exceptions, however, would represent a deep rupture with EU legal and political doctrine and are unlikely to materialise.

4 Rule of law and democracy

How to protect the rule of law and democracy in an enlarged Union is among the more fundamental issues. Since 1997, respect for the EU's founding principles – 'freedom, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as the rule of law' – has been a Treaty condition for successful membership bids.⁶ The first of the so-called Copenhagen criteria has obliged past applicants to reform their judiciary, rewrite their constitution and adopt legislation to root out corruption and organised crime before entry. Some of today's candidates face a daunting task in these fields.

At the administrative level, rule of law deficiencies weaken a candidate's capacity to enforce EU law, to fight corruption, to participate in the single market and to absorb EU funding. They also reduce the appetite among EU governments and within the European Parliament to cooperate in justice and home affairs. At a political and constitutional level, rule of law deficiencies are at odds with the Union's identity and undermine its credibility at home and abroad. Certain current EU members are likely to demand that candidates demonstrate an impeccable rule-of-law record.

In recent years, however, the Union has discovered that glowing rule-of-law report cards on accession offer no guarantee against democratic backsliding in the future. It has also realised that it has less leverage in this area over members (post-accession) than over candidates.⁷ Since 2015, the EU has launched procedures addressing the disregard of the rule of law and of its founding values (Art. 7) against Poland and Hungary respectively, without significant effect. Although the more recent, still rather limited linkage of EU funding to compliance with the rule of law gives the Union more leverage, systemic attacks on the independence of the judiciary or the media are not easily held in check from the outside.

It would be unfair to presuppose *a priori* that any new member vetted as democratic on entry would one day resort to following an illiberal or autocratic path. In light of recent history and track records, however, current member states may understandably wish to protect the Union better against this possibility, for instance by bolstering the Union's own rule of law and legislative standards in certain policy fields, pre-enlargement, or by designing stricter rule-of-law oversight. Politically such an upgrade of the EU's *acquis* would be difficult to achieve with all 27, but a smaller group of countries might

be able to do so with the aim of welcoming future members into this 'rule of law group'. During the euro crisis, member states keen to adhere to stricter budgetary rules resorted to a similar device and founded a 'fiscal discipline club' (2011), to which new member Croatia subsequently also acceded. Doing nothing to strengthen the rule of law risks a loss of cohesion and a growing gap between rhetoric and reality.

5 External security

Geographically and strategically, enlargement from 27 to 36 states will change the shape of the Union and the nature of threats to it. A new external border will harbour more diverse geostrategic interests. The Union's territorial centre of gravity will continue shifting eastward, away from the Atlantic and towards the Black Sea. Unless EU member states collectively strengthen their defence capabilities and decision-making capacity significantly, reliance on the United States for security will most probably increase.

Ukraine's entry will present unique security challenges. Currently, about one sixth of its territory is occupied by Russia. Although starting accession negotiations with a country at war is feasible, concluding them poses major difficulties. EU membership includes a mutual defence clause (Art. 42(7) TEU): an attack on one must be considered an attack on all. However, unlike NATO with its Article 5, the EU is currently unable to offer Ukraine sufficient military support to uphold this commitment. This is why, after 1989, all EU entrant states formerly in the Soviet sphere first joined NATO. Strategic linkages between NATO membership (or similarly strong security guarantees) and EU membership need to be kept in mind.

Among Western Balkan candidates, a number of unresolved territorial and security issues remain, including the international status of Kosovo. These should be tackled pre-accession. At a minimum, a 'confidence clause' – as recently proposed by European Council President Charles Michel – could be added to the accession treaties to ensure that countries which have just joined cannot block the accession of others.⁸ In the case of Ukraine, bar Russia's total defeat, thorny issues of territorial status may arise, not so much legally as politically, as the example of the divided island of Cyprus shows. These are issues that will require careful consideration in due course.

III Political considerations

An impossible conundrum

Russia's war of aggression has changed the strategic map of Europe. In June 2022, considering EU enlargement a geopolitical imperative – and overcoming earlier hesitations – the European Council unanimously agreed in principle to open the Union's door to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Leaders also recommitted to the accession perspective of the six Western Balkan nations in the EU waiting room. There is a new consensus on the strategic necessity to anchor these states firmly in the Union's sphere of security and prosperity, on which the practical and negotiation work in the months and years ahead can build.

At the same time, this geopolitical imperative encounters other, perhaps equally important imperatives. Paramount among them is the need to protect the Union's functioning, cohesion and founding values. 'Lowering the bar' to quickly accommodate new members would risk unravelling the Union's fabric and come at a massive cost. If EU governments decided to sacrifice the Union's internal cohesion in the name of overriding geopolitical interests, they would still need to persuade their own voters. Any future enlargement treaty may be subject to a referendum in one or several member states, the outcome of which is far from a given.

These tensions present EU policymakers with the dilemma of having to deal with an objective that is both necessary but also impossible. Faced with the demands and hopes of Kyiv, Chisinau or Tirana, they must *and* cannot open the Union's door – at least not yet. Two ways out of this conundrum exist. The first is to play for time, allowing for reforms on both sides that enable the EU to eventually grant accession to applicants. The second is to find alternative and creative solutions regarding what membership entails. Both options are currently under discussion.

Timing and process

What is impossible today can become possible tomorrow. Hence, of course, the obligation for candidates to change and reform before entry. Hence also the need for the Union to prepare and change itself. These two processes,

legally distinct but politically connected, are intended to come together at the moment when both Union and (some or all) candidates are 'ready' and enlargement can happen. But when might this be?

European Council President Michel recently suggested 2030 as 'a clear goal'.⁹ For some, this date is disappointingly late. For others, bizarrely early. The idea of a target date itself was also criticised, as undercutting a purely 'merit-based' assessment of candidates' progress. A deadline can concentrate minds and build the momentum for taking on the enormous efforts of reform. On the other hand, it can also raise unrealistic expectations resulting in future frustration and resentment. The Balkan experience is sobering in this respect. North Macedonia has been an official candidate since 2005. It even changed its name to clear a political hurdle. However, it had to wait 17 years for the opening of accession negotiations in 2022. There is a fine line between offering a sense of purpose and false hope.

A striking asymmetry exists in how each side must do its 'homework'. For candidate countries, there are clear procedures, methodologies and box-ticking progress reports prepared by the Commission. For the Union's internal reforms, no such processes are in place. The criterion of the Union's 'absorption capacity', introduced in 1993 for the post-Cold War enlargement, has never been clearly defined.¹⁰ Although it sounds like an objective measure (as if the Union were a sponge), 'absorption capacity' is a deeply political notion. It grants the Union freedom to define its own strategic interests with regard to enlargement. The suggestion that the Union's interests do not always coincide with further enlargement has encountered resistance in the past.¹¹ Yet any body politic needs the capacity to gauge its vital interests, borders and cohesion in order to survive in the stream of events – certainly in times of war.

In practice, given their political nature, the EU's internal preparations will have to be structured and planned almost from scratch. This will require strong personal leadership from the European Council and its members, among whom sits the Commission President. The questions that need answering will take years to resolve and could, for example, be interlinked with political timetables such as the next Strategic Agenda (2024–29), to be decided by the June 2024 European Council, and the new Commission working programme. A first proposal for the next MFF, covering the period 2028–34, is due in 2025. The ratification deadline for a new EU Treaty,

should governments decide this is needed, could be pegged to the start of a new EU political cycle, in 2029 or 2034. Other formats and processes, including those that allow for greater out-of-the-box thinking, could also be invented.

Alternative solutions

Is there some political space, hitherto unused, that lies beyond the eternal waiting room but at the same time falls short of full membership? If so, occupying this space may offer a second way of dealing with the necessary yet impossible goal of enlargement. Might accession be restructured in less binary ways, allowing candidates to become partial or associate members, before acquiring full membership at a later stage?

Hinting at this possibility, various concepts – gradual integration, accelerated accession, sectoral integration – have emerged in the discussion.¹² Commission President Von der Leyen backed the notion of gradual integration in a recent speech.¹³ The concept has appeared in European Council conclusions on the Western Balkans (June 2022). However, a precise understanding of what it means in practice is not available.

One thing is certain, the European Political Community (EPC), the pan-European gathering of 44 states that emerged after Russia's invasion, cannot offer the in-between status the EU may need. With interest-based cooperation at its core, and without conditionality and merit-based membership criteria, the EPC has nothing to do with EU accession. Many EPC participants like it precisely for that reason. Governed by older diplomatic norms and practices, this new grouping of states promotes pragmatic partnership among all European states bar Russia and Belarus, including those that have turned their backs on the EU or the rule of law.¹⁴

Gradual integration, by contrast, builds on established EU accession procedures. The idea is to phase in membership, offering candidates visible and tangible benefits early on and in immediate return for reform progress. This more dynamic approach has political upsides. It could restore enthusiasm for a process that has dragged on too long and has led to reform cynicism among the Balkan accession countries. For Ukraine

and Moldova gradual integration could help preserve political patience, which will undoubtedly be necessary.

However, this approach is unlikely to offer a pain-free way out of the enlargement dilemma. For a start, there are not so many easy 'extras' left to offer. A plethora of tailor-made bilateral agreements, structures and programmes – outside the enlargement policy framework – already exists. Most important are the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia and the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) for the Balkan candidates. These give access to benefits that come close to those of full membership, from participation in Erasmus, Horizon Europe and EU Covid response initiatives to visa-free travel, free trade in goods and sectoral market integration into the Energy Community. If gradual integration or 'associate membership' is not to be dismissed as the latest stalling tactic or a purely semantic solution, it needs to offer something more.

Could this 'more' be some form of partial and gradual access to the single market and its four freedoms? Free movement of goods could be an attractive early win for a candidate like Ukraine. But the EU's ban on 'cherry-picking' formed the cornerstone of its Brexit diplomacy. Unless the Union is prepared to water down this core principle in the circumstances, candidates could only gain access to the single market in its entirety, effectively obtaining a status like that of EEA member Norway. This, however, would raise the bar in terms of the criteria they would need to meet, meaning such access would come late rather than early in the process. Indeed, if existing members were to insist on protecting their markets against new members with safeguards, as in 2004, full access to the single market would be acquired only after membership.

So far, the EU seems more intent on pursuing the pragmatic route of *ad hoc*, flexible and interest-based forms of cooperation, without carving out new categories of membership. Areas such as energy security, supply chain resilience, transport infrastructure and economic investment lend themselves well to such an approach.

Alongside an economic and pragmatic relationship with benefits, more could be done to accommodate the desire for recognition and participation in the Union's political life – not just as 'rule-taker' but as 'co-shaper'.

Ideas include giving foreign and other ministers speaking rights (but no voting rights) during (informal) Council meetings, observer status in other EU institutions and full participation in EU agencies. Such visible and immediate institutional inclusion is likely to be more meaningful than any formal overhaul of the EU's accession policy. National leaders in candidate countries want to be able to show their domestic audiences that they are among Europe's decision-makers. This is why the participation approach perhaps offers the most promising path to a viable 'in-between' status.

Public acceptance

The enlargement of 2004, followed by the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, holds important lessons for the future. One is that public support for enlargement cannot be taken for granted. Although the post-Cold War accession was not a foregone conclusion, ultimately leaders and public majorities in Europe rallied to the grand mission of 'reuniting the continent'. But support quickly gave way to enlargement fatigue, deepening public anxiety about jobs and wages, the growth of intra-EU migration and the spectre of 'social dumping', which made politicians on both the left and right wary of further new members.

Referendums held on the EU constitutional treaty in France and the Netherlands, in the aftermath of the 2004 enlargement, were lost by considerable margins. When accession negotiations with Ankara were finally opened in 2005, they stalled almost immediately. Politicians in various EU countries realised voter support for enlargement was low. In presidential elections in France in 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy campaigned against Turkish membership. Croatia, in 2013, was the last aspirant to enter. A year later, Commission President Juncker decreed an 'enlargement pause', to broad satisfaction.

Wariness about enlargement has lingered in many parts of the Union. In 2016, after Russia's annexation of Crimea and parts of the Donbass, over 60% of Dutch voters rejected ratification of the association agreement with Ukraine in a referendum, amid fears the agreement would open the door to its membership. The influx of workers from eastern Europe, often seen by voters as equivalent to migration *tout court*, contributed to the UK's vote for Brexit. Democratic backsliding in

Hungary and Poland has added a further concern, antagonising otherwise pro-EU voters.

The public mood is changeable. Russia's war of aggression might now bolster public support for the accession of Ukraine and other candidates. The solidarity Europeans have shown with Ukraine since February 2022 – for instance by sheltering millions of refugees – has been remarkable. At the same time, whether such solidarity translates into support for EU enlargement, and endures once the war is over, is uncertain. The astonishing recent spat between Warsaw and Kiev, over the import of cheap Ukrainian grain and its impact on the livelihoods of Polish farmers, offers a preview of how volatile the politics of enlargement can become, even in a country that counts itself among Ukraine's staunchest allies.

To offer new members a home that is fit for all 36 countries, EU leaders must find ways to bring their own voters on board, or the door to the Union is likely to stay shut. Here lies perhaps the currently most underestimated mission the Union faces.

IV Conclusion

In the years ahead, the prospect of enlargement will unleash all kinds of conflicting forces. The politics of accession – driven by timetables and homework, promises and disappointments, not to mention unpredictable electoral dynamics – will be complex and divisive. The strategic necessity of the Union's enlargement to include Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkan candidates is no longer strongly challenged. The benefits it will bring for a secure European order in the aftermath of Russia's aggression are beyond doubt. Nevertheless, the Union has barely started to grapple with the challenges, costs, risks and downsides that an enlarged EU may bring, let alone with the potential popular backlash against not just one accession or another but against the Union itself. Caught between necessity and impossibility, the impatience of new candidates and the resentment of older ones, and under time pressure exerted by the pace of events, the EU has no place to hide.

In this situation, clarity and honesty about the trade-offs and dilemmas the Union faces is paramount and requires leadership. Ducking difficult

questions in the hope that they go away will not fool the public on either side of the Union's doorstep.

In the uncertainty of the moment, the prudent course of action for the Union is to prepare for every eventuality: helping candidates get ready for EU accession as swiftly and robustly as possible, while doing its own homework on the budget, institutional and other reform, as well as exploring pragmatic and short-term options for involving accession countries more closely in the EU. Only by mapping the terrain and all the paths available, while making progress, can the journey ahead be made clear and achievable.

Endnotes

1. This publication updates and builds on an informal note prepared in June 2023 by the Brussels Institute for Geopolitics as input for an informal discussion among EU heads of state or government.
2. Austria, Finland and Sweden, all three neutral in the Cold War, joined the EU in 1995. Bulgaria, Romania and then Croatia followed in 2007 and 2013.
3. The Lisbon Treaty foresees such a 2/3 system with strictly equal rotation among member states, but after the Irish 'no' vote in the 2008 Treaty referendum, the European Council decided to maintain one Commissioner per member state.
4. The 'passerelle clauses' allow a shift from unanimity to qualified majority voting in Council decision-making via a simplified Treaty amendment procedure. Alongside a general 'passerelle' in Art 48(7) TEU, there are special ones for abolishing specific vetoes in, for instance, foreign and security policy (Art 31(3) TEU).
5. Although increasing the total number of MEPs above 751 requires a Treaty change, proportionally reducing the seats allocated to current members to make room for new ones can be done on EP initiative, by European Council decision and with EP consent (Art 14(2) TEU).
6. Art. F TEU (Amsterdam Treaty), referred to in its Art. O on enlargement. Note that today's Art. 2 TEU speaks of 'values' rather than 'principles' and adds 'human dignity' to the list.
7. In order to accompany the two 2007 entrants Bulgaria and Romania with justice reforms, the fight against corruption and, in the former's case, organised crime, the EU put in place a 'cooperation and verification mechanism', which lasted until 2023. It was these members' desire to see the lifting of internal border controls with the rest of the Schengen area, which has not materialised to this day, which gave the Union a leverage it no longer has over Poland and Hungary.
8. European Council, 'Speech by President Charles Michel at the Bled Strategic Forum', 28 August 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/08/28/speech-by-president-charles-michel-at-the-bled-strategic-forum>
9. Ibid.
10. The June 1993 Copenhagen summit, which adopted the three 'Copenhagen criteria' candidates must fulfil, also introduced this fourth one: 'The Union's capacity to absorb new members, while maintaining the momentum of European integration, is also an important consideration in the general interest of both the Union and the candidate countries.'
11. When this debate last raged, in 2006–07 in the context of Turkey's accession prospects, one EU analyst favouring the country's entry called absorption capacity 'a dangerous tool in the hands of those who want to keep out Turkey and stop enlargement altogether.' (Katinka Barysch, 'Absorption capacity – the wrong debate', Centre for European Reform (CER), 9 November 2006, as quoted in Hans Kribbe, *The Strongmen: European Encounters with Sovereign Power*, Agenda Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2021, p. 144.)
12. The idea also builds on the EU's revised accession methodology (2020) which, in exchange for offering certain benefits earlier, also makes the negotiation process reversible.
13. European Commission, 'Keynote speech by President Von der Leyen at the GLOBSEC 2023 Bratislava Forum, 31 May 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_20_208
14. For a more elaborate analysis of the body's nature, purpose and possible future, see Hans Kribbe, Sébastien Lumet and Luuk van Middelaar, 'Bringing the greater European family together. New perspectives on the European Political Community, Brussels Institute for Geopolitics, May 2023. <https://big-europe.eu/publication/bringing-the-greater-european-family-together>

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