

Towards an Agenda 2030 for Enlargement

Recommendations to consolidate the relaunch
of the EU accession process

Stalled until 24 February 2022, the enlargement policy has since featured among the top priorities of the European Union. In the light of Russia's aggression, the bloc has witnessed the cost of non-enlargement and the eminently geopolitical value of a credible accession path. However, the prospect of a "Europe of 30+" also raises concerns among the 27 Member States because of the institutional, socio-economic, budgetary and internal cohesion challenges it raises altogether. The new institutional cycle (2024-2029) should enable this policy to consolidate its renewed momentum, echoing that of 2004. To achieve this, it must be driven and closely coordinated by the Commission, with greater involvement of the Member States and candidate countries at all levels, and embrace **gradual integration based on a strategic document to be adopted: an Agenda 2030**, in reference to Agenda 2000, which in 1997 paved the way for the 2004 enlargement.

I • A driven and engaging enlargement process

STRENGTHENING THE COMMISSION'S STEERING ROLE

A European Commissioner's portfolio entirely dedicated to enlargement, as foreseen in the distribution of the new college, shows the strategic importance given to this policy. It rightly distinguishes it from the neighbourhood policy, which has been rendered partly obsolete by the new applications for EU membership, as is also reflected in the creation of a "Mediterranean" portfolio. To make this much welcomed reorganisation operational, it is necessary to:

- Establish a fully-fledged Enlargement DG that fully assumes its impetus and coordination roles

The commitment to enlargement must be reflected in the very structure of the Commission's departments. A portfolio devoted to enlargement must be supported by a **DG entirely dedicated to**

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#enlargement
#2030
#gradualintegration

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this policy. This would acknowledge the difference in nature between the EU's accession process and the special relations it is forging with other neighbouring countries that have no intention to fully join the Union. DG Enlargement must work closely with the Commission's thematic and technical Directorates, whose expertise is widely needed in the accession negotiations. Similarly, the Commissioner must not be isolated but work closely with the rest of the College, all of whom are to be involved in this process.

- Give the DG substantial resources and build on the experience of 2004

The larger number of candidate countries, the varying degrees of their accession procedures and the complexity of the negotiations call for a **strengthening of the teams involved**. To do this, the Commission should **build on the recent experience of European or national civil servants from Member States that have joined since 2004**, many of whom were themselves involved in the accession process in their country of origin. Technical cooperation (administrative twinings) also needs to be stepped up to help candidate countries build up their own administrative capacity, again drawing on the experience of previous enlargements.

IN-DEPTH AND LONG-TERM COMMITMENT FROM BOTH MEMBER STATES AND CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

Since enlargement is above all a political choice, the accession process cannot be reduced to a technical exercise, confined to a bilateral relationship between the Commission and the candidate country's government. It must **involve the Member States and candidate countries at all levels**, beyond the national administrations concerned. A political commitment must be made to remove ambiguities on both sides about the process being pursued in order to give it **transparency and democratic credibility**, by including other public stakeholders and civil society.

- Overcoming blockages by Member States in bilateral disputes

The accession negotiations concern and commit all the Member States. They put the future of the Union at stake. To avoid their progress being dependent on the veto of a single state, motivated by bilateral or purely domestic short-term interests, the Twenty-Seven should conclude **a political agreement which, without amending the Treaties, would prevent the accession process from being blocked for too long**:

- **Unanimous voting should only be required at the opening of negotiations and at their final closure.**
- For all intermediate steps, decisions should be taken by qualified majority voting (subject to guarantees for Member States in minority). Failing that, if some Member States refuse to waive the veto for these intermediate stages, the use of it in these specific cases **should become suspensive, for a maximum of 6 months**. If over that period the veto does not win the support of at least three other States, the matter would be referred to the EU's Court of Justice for a ruling on whether the dispute holds a reasonable European dimension. If it decides that the matters with which the applicant state is charged are not incompatible with EU membership, the veto is lifted.
- This practice of a suspensive veto could even be extended to the opening and closing of accession negotiations but with a year-long suspension. It could be extended to other policy areas with a view to broader institutional reform of the EU.

- Placing national parliaments at the heart of the process

Enlargement is not just a governmental affair. National parliaments must be kept regularly informed and engaged to debate. Parliaments from all the Member States and candidate countries should therefore be encouraged to **discuss the yearly "enlargement package"** published by the Commission, as already done in some Member States. This would lead to a resolution putting forward the priorities and concerns of each State, helping to identify the political balance of power within

the bloc. National parliaments should also **develop partnerships with their counterparts in the candidate countries**, in order to improve mutual understanding and identify problem areas, well in ahead of the ratification of the accession treaties.

- Strengthening the involvement of local authorities

Decentralised cooperation is another effective means of bringing people together and preparing public opinion ahead of ratification. Local and regional authorities can establish cooperation in support of the accession process, through twinning arrangements with their counterparts in the candidate countries and by drawing on the expertise of the European Committee of the Regions. They are also well equipped to implement **communication strategies to engage serious public debate** throughout the process.

- Involving civil society

Technical and administrative assistance to candidate countries can be provided beyond national administrations by **involving non-state actors**: chambers of commerce, trade unions and other stakeholders. These players can contribute to the training of civil servants and civil society players in the candidate countries (exchanges, internships). In the fields of culture, sport, education, the media and research, existing measures (European Capital of Culture, Creative Europe programme, European Year) should also be used in view of the enlargement process, with the support of the EESC. The next multiannual financial framework should include dedicated resources for this purpose and the Commission should put in place tenders adapted to this type of initiative.

- Investing in education, mobilising the youth

Other tenders to promote a better understanding of enlargement should be addressed to the **education** community. Supporting youth mobility but also of teachers would **spur a generation for whom “Europe of 30+” will be a shared perspective**. The existing initiatives (RYCO, ReSPA, the new Tirana campus of the

College of Europe) must be given a more ambitious agenda towards enlargement with adequate resources. The emergence of complementary initiatives should be encouraged, with particular emphasis on the training of future national and regional decision-makers and civil servants.

II • Enlargement through gradual integration

Given both the incompressible time required by a demanding enlargement process and the geopolitical imperative of eradicating as quickly as possible any unstable and vulnerable “grey areas” in the bloc’s neighbourhood, a **gradual integration** of candidate countries is de facto on-going. This pragmatic and innovative approach should be developed along **two major ways**:

I UNLOCKING THE FULL POTENTIAL OF THE LOGIC OF STAGED ACCESSION

- Supporting reconciliation and regional cooperation

The Berlin Process initiated in 2014 and the resulting project for a regional common market should be supported to deepen economic trade among candidate countries. This greater **interdependence** can implicitly facilitate **reconciliation** in a region still in desperate need of memorial appeasement. Local initiatives along these lines should be expanded, with the help of the various stakeholders mentioned above. A similar process needs to be set up with the countries of the so-called “Eastern Trio”, also tackling painful issues of memory and a lack of regional trade.

- Anticipating entry into the internal market

The new €6 billion Growth Facility for 2024-2027 should emulate participating countries to **reform and join the internal market**. According to its assessment, this initiative could be renewed and expanded in the next multiannual financial framework, extending it to Ukraine (by linking it to the reconstruction effort), Moldova, as announced, and possibly Georgia, under tangible progress towards accession. This growth stimulus should be articulated with the EU’s competitiveness,

economic security and green transition agendas to **highlight the benefits of enlargement**.

- Promoting high-level political dialogue
In order to establish a **more regular and equal political dialogue** between members and candidates, it would be wise to involve the Heads of State or Government of the candidate countries most advanced in the negotiations in selected parts of the **European Council** summit programme, not only to discuss enlargement but also to exchange views on other key issues for the EU.
- Creating an Associated Member status
Gradual integration would benefit politically from the granting of an **intermediate status between that of candidate and that of member**, with tangible benefits. Candidate countries that have made substantial progress in the accession process should be granted a new status of associate member of the EU to promote socialisation between them and the Member States, so that the Union can function more smoothly after enlargement.

Along with the progress made in the negotiations, **access to this new transitory status must be conditional** on the solemn adoption of a parliamentary resolution confirming the full commitment of the country to the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and to the guidelines set out in the EU's Strategic Compass endorsed in Versailles in March 2022.

Associate Member status would give access to the following **benefits**:

- the participation of its representatives, without voting rights, in Council meetings, at least when it meets in the configurations corresponding to the closed negotiation chapters
- acceptance of observers in the European Parliament's work, without voting rights
- a level of allocated financial resources progressing towards that of a new Member State, and substantially higher than of pre-accession aid amounts.

Access to this status must be **reversible in the event of regression or prolonged stagnation**, according to a simple and effective procedure. **Under no circumstances should this transitional status become an end in itself**. On the contrary, it must only pave the way to full membership.

The introduction of this status would make the concept of "gradual integration" more understandable to the wider public. It would **step out of the binary logic of "candidates vs. members"**, which tends to permanently distort relations between States, with harmful consequences for the functioning of the enlarged Union.

The Commission should carry out a legal analysis to determine to what extent its introduction and functioning are feasible under the current Treaties.

I FAVOURING THE REGATTA APPROACH

- Conclude with the most advanced
As simultaneous entry of all the candidate countries (*Big Bang*) is unthinkable, the EU could aim **concluding accession negotiations for at least two of them by the end of the institutional cycle**, paving the way for their accession in 2030 or 2031. This would give credibility to the process between now and the next European elections in 2029.
- Extending transition periods
The use of **transition periods** in sectors where too rapid an integration could be risky (e.g. agriculture) should be promoted to perpetuate gradual integration after formal accession and dispel the fears that the latter gives rise to. These transition periods must not, however, compromise the gains in European competitiveness expected from enlargement, nor call into question the foundations of the Union. The aim is to facilitate and accelerate the process of integration, not to push the Union towards a "cherry-picking" logic or a fragmentation of the single market.

- Closely monitoring the rule of law

In line with recent developments of the EU toolbox on budgetary conditionality to the rule of law, this compliance must continue to be the subject of rigorous monitoring by the Commission, **strictly subjecting access to increased financial resources and all the other benefits** of integration. The Union must give itself the means to really apply the two strands of the “**more for more, less for less**” logic.

The name “Agenda 2030” does not hint at the year of accession of the newcomers but underlines the **commitment of the 27 Member States to stand ready**, for their part, to enlarge their Union upon that date. Any accession from then on would depend on each candidate’s situation. Politically, this deadline would put enlargement in the 2029 European elections campaign, to ensure that it is democratically debated, prior to the national ratifications of the forthcoming accession treaties.

Conclusion • Steering the enlargement process according to an Agenda 2030

To give direction to the process under way and to clarify the objectives and stages to be implemented during the new institutional cycle, **the Commission should adopt, at the beginning of its term of office, an ambitious communication devoted to enlargement.** This communication, which we suggest should be named “**Agenda 2030**”, would build on its recent past communications and respond to the European Council’s wish to “use all possibilities to further advance gradual integration”. It should establish an enlargement policy roadmap inspired by the innovations outlined above, accompanied by **impact studies and a communication strategy aimed at citizens.**

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