

The French referendum on EU accession: a ticking time bomb that needs defusing

• Summary

Having been elevated to the status of an EU priority since Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, enlargement has gained new momentum. The prospect of new accessions around 2030 is becoming a credible possibility. However, this overlooks the referendum made mandatory in France by a 2005 constitutional reform for the ratification of future accession treaties. A relaxation of this rule was introduced in 2008, but its effect is likely to be only very limited. Any future accession – even for states that are well prepared and unlikely to significantly affect the balance of power and the broader equilibrium within the EU – therefore risks being held hostage to the vagaries of French politics and the uncertainties of a referendum campaign. Recognising this risk today, as well as the fundamentally indecent nature of the mechanism currently provided for in the French Constitution regarding future EU enlargements, could help to find solutions capable of avoiding it or, at the very least, reducing it.

We set out below several proposals for concrete action along these lines, going beyond a debate – desirable though it may be, yet undoubtedly

politically difficult – on a revision of the French Constitution that would reverse the 2005 decision:

- Involve the French Parliament, on a regular and meaningful basis, in a national and European political debate on future enlargements;
- Encourage initiatives by civil society and local authorities;
- Establish a structure in France – a sort of hybrid between a civil society forum and a citizens' convention – dedicated to preparing for future EU enlargements;
- Create and maintain a public database listing exchanges (university or school partnerships, local authority twinning schemes, etc.) and other initiatives that exist between France and candidate countries.

Furthermore, a constructive shift in attitudes towards future enlargements also requires a more proactive and comprehensive political discourse on European issues in general, in line with the geopolitical context in which France and Europe must now navigate.

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ENLARGEMENT &
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Since the start of Russia's large-scale aggression against Ukraine, the enlargement of the European Union has once again become a priority for the EU-27, following a 'lost' decade that followed Croatia's accession in 2013¹. This shift is particularly notable in the case of France, given the traditionally reserved attitude towards the integration of new states into the Union, characteristic of both the political elites and a large proportion of French citizens. France, moreover, contributed to the stalling of the process and to its loss of credibility in the region most directly concerned – the Western Balkans – through its 2019 veto preventing the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, which came as a cold shower for the region and in particular for North Macedonia². The defining moment of this shift in French position was [President Macron's speech in Bratislava](#), but numerous other statements point in the same direction: in the post-24 February 2022 context, the French authorities have fully realised the geopolitical significance of the enlargement process.

Long seen as an obstacle to France's ambition of a "powerful Europe", it is now recognised as both an essential prerequisite for its realisation and a key indicator of its credibility: how could a European Union that is unable to stabilise – or "Europeanise" – its immediate neighbourhood hope to be taken seriously on the global stage? How could it successfully contend with rival or openly hostile powers by driving neighbouring countries – disappointed and humiliated by an unfulfilled European promise – into their arms? Indeed, there is no end to the proactive statements – in Paris, Brussels and other capitals –

forecasting new accessions around 2030 or shortly thereafter. This prioritisation of enlargement has been further, and rather clumsily, emphasised by [recently publicised remarks regarding a hypothetical 'fast-track accession'](#) for Ukraine as early as 2027.

However, whilst this political shift is real as far as the current President of the Republic and government are concerned, it is out of step not only with the majority of the opposition, but also and above all with the country's public opinion³, which remains cautious on enlargement. Compared to other Europeans, this is not a uniquely French phenomenon in itself, but it does lead to one that represents a ticking time bomb, potentially fatal to the enlargement process. Indeed, the completion of the latter would require ratification by referendum in France.

I • The dangerous legacy of a circumstantial revision in 2005

The obligation to put any ratification of a future EU accession treaty to a referendum was introduced into the French constitution in 2005⁴, through a new Article 88.5: "*Any Government Bill authorizing the ratification of a treaty pertaining to the accession of a state to the European Union and to the European Communities shall be submitted to referendum by the President of the Republic.*"

Through this constitutional amendment, President Jacques Chirac sought to defuse the controversy surrounding Turkey's accession, following the [European Council's decision of 16–17 December 2004](#) to open accession negotiations with Ankara, and to prevent this

- 1 See: Couteau B. & Macek L. 'Enlargement of the European Union: an unexpected revival', Infographic, Jacques Delors Institute, June 2023, <https://institutdelors.eu/publications/elargissement-de-lunion-europeenne-une-reliance-inattendue>
- 2 Despite the fact this country had many assets that gave it hope of making rapid progress, having accepted, through the Prespa Agreement, the painful compromise regarding its official name. See also: https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/10/23/en-ne-tenant-pas-parole-sur-la-macedoine-la-france-et-l-union-europeenne-perdent-leur-credibilite_6016513_3232.html
- 3 According to [Special Eurobarometer 564](#) (February–March 2025), in response to the question 'Thinking about further enlargement of the EU, overall, would you say you are...' 43% of French people replied 'very much in favour' (8%) or 'somewhat in favour' (35%), compared with 48% who replied 'not very much in favour' (29%) or 'not at all in favour' (19%). This places France in last place among the Twenty-Seven.
- 4 [Constitutional Law No. 2005-204 of 1 March 2005](#) amending Title XV of the Constitution. Until then, with the exception of the 1973 enlargement (see below), accession treaties were ratified in France by a parliamentary vote, requiring a simple majority of those voting in each chamber.

debate from interfering with that on the ratification of the ‘Constitutional Treaty’⁵.

During the work on another constitutional reform in 2008, this ‘circumstantial’ article was the subject of much criticism and several amendments were proposed. The Baladur Committee, which was tasked with preparing this reform, proposed replacing the automatic and mandatory recourse to a referendum with the procedure set out in Article 89⁶, a solution adopted by the government in the draft constitutional law submitted to Parliament. Alternative solutions were considered: for example, the [National Assembly’s Law Commission suggested](#) that a referendum should only be required in the case of the accession of a country whose population exceeds 5% of the total population of the Union. The rapporteur of the Foreign Affairs Committee, for his part, proposed that the President of the Republic should not be able to decide between the parliamentary ratification procedure and the referendum procedure before the expiry of a six-month period from the signing of the accession treaty; if, during those six months, a majority of MPs, supported by at least one-fifth of the electorate, so demands, the referendum procedure should apply⁷. Ultimately, a different proposal was adopted: Constitutional Law No. 2008-724 of 23 July 2008 introduces a new paragraph into Article 88.5 of the aforementioned Constitution: *“Notwithstanding the foregoing, by passing a motion adopted in identical terms in each House by a three-fifths majority, Parliament may authorize the passing of the Bill according to the procedure provided for in paragraph three of article 89.”*⁸ This same Constitutional Law

renews the clever provision devised by the authors of the 2005 reform to ensure that the new Article 88.5 did not apply to Croatia – for which the European Council had authorised the opening of accession negotiations at the same time as for Turkey, but whose accession process was progressing more rapidly and, unlike Turkey’s, enjoyed strong support within the EU-27: *‘Article 88-5 of the Constitution (...) shall not apply to accessions following an intergovernmental conference the convening of which was decided by the European Council before 1 July 2004.’* Indeed, the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) for Croatia was convened at the [European Council in June 2004](#), whereas Turkey had to wait until the one in December 2004.

Does this 2008 relaxation make it possible for France to ratify a future accession treaty without resorting to a referendum? In theory, yes, but in practice, nothing could be less certain. Indeed, the Constitutional Act of 23 July 2008, rather than offering a simple choice between a parliamentary vote or a referendum, clearly retains the latter as the standard procedure and merely opens a narrow door to a possible parliamentary alternative. Indeed, rather than leaving the President to choose between the two procedures, the new wording of Article 88-5 requires both houses of Parliament to adopt, each by a three-fifths majority, a motion authorising parliamentary ratification of the accession treaty, which amounts to declaring that a referendum is unnecessary or inappropriate. Is such a vote reasonably conceivable in a country where there remains a strong feeling that the last referendum on a European issue was ‘sto-

5 See, for example, this passage from [the Opinion issued on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Committee on the draft constitutional law on the modernisation of the institutions of the Fifth Republic by Mr Axel Poniatowski](#): ‘By providing for the mandatory organisation of a referendum to authorise future enlargements of the Union, this new provision was intended to prevent the debate on Turkey from interfering with the referendum on the European Constitution. However, the French people’s ‘no’ vote on 29 May 2005 revealed the failure of this circumstantial strategy.’ Or, in the minutes of the committee’s examination of the same draft constitutional bill: ‘Mr Hervé de Charette (...) described the constitutional amendment of 1 March 2005, passed to compensate for the President of the Republic’s agreement in December 2004 to open negotiations with Turkey, as a circumstantial measure. A number of MPs, including himself, voted in favour of this mandatory referendum clause out of political discipline, but wrongly so.’

6 This article gives the President the choice between ratification by referendum or by Congress (with a three-fifths majority of the votes cast).

7 See the report by A. Poniatowski cited above.

8 Article 89-3 of the Constitution allows for its revision by Parliament convened in Congress by the President of the Republic. The adoption of the draft revision requires three-fifths of the votes cast in Congress.

len⁹? Where the subject ‘enlargement’ is consistently viewed negatively by a large proportion of citizens and by most political forces? Where rhetoric accusing the ‘elites’ and representative democracy of betraying the ‘people’ thrives, by stirring up the fantasy of direct democracy¹⁰? Such a scenario might be conceivable in the context of an enlargement that enjoyed the consensus of all significant political forces and concerned a country that did not raise major doubts among citizens, as might be the case with Iceland’s accession, which appears to be under consideration once again. But we are very far from a consensus today, and there is no reason to believe that this situation will change fundamentally in the coming years. Moreover, future enlargements are likely to involve countries surrounded by considerable controversy, whether in the Balkans or, a fortiori, Ukraine.

Given the current – and foreseeable, in the short to medium term – state of affairs, it therefore seems reasonable to incorporate the requirement for ratification by referendum in France into any strategic thinking on future EU enlargements. And to recognise this political constraint for what it is: one of the major risks likely to derail this project, which is nonetheless crucial to the credibility of the European Union.

Even if a referendum were to be avoided, the dual requirement of securing a three-fifths parliamentary majority in each chamber (Article 88-5) and then in the Congress (Article 89-3) also makes its outcome highly uncertain given the persistent fragmentation of the French political landscape.

II • Ratification of future accessions by referendum: a regrettable French exception

This situation is all the more regrettable given that ratification of an accession treaty by referendum is an unusual idea and one that carries with it a certain indecency.

Indeed, until now, it has been customary for referendums to ratify accession treaties to be reserved for the acceding states (if they so wish and if their constitutions allow it). There is a strong rationale behind this: for countries joining the EU, it is a fundamental, even fateful, decision, as it involves delegating part of their sovereignty to the European institutions. It is also a test of the strength of their motivation: a country that were to join the Union at the behest of its political elites without the consent of a clear majority of its population would be at serious risk of quickly finding itself at the centre of major problems – both for itself and for the Union. Given this fateful nature, the risk that the referendum campaign might be significantly hijacked by other issues and that the citizens’ response might in fact address other questions¹¹, remains relatively negligible.

The situation is exactly the opposite for existing Member States. This is why, with the very specific exception of the 1973 French referendum (see Box 1), accession treaties have always been ratified through the parliamentary process in these countries, even in those which otherwise habitually resort to referendums to ratify amendments to the Treaties establishing the Union¹². For a Member State, the stakes involved in the accession of a new Member State are inevi-

9 A highly biased and questionable interpretation of the events of 2005–2009. See, for example: Yves Bertoncini, Bruno Cautrès and Thierry Chopin: *France and ‘Europe’ 20 years after the ‘no’ vote: moving beyond denial and tension*, Terra Nova, 22 May 2025

10 As evidenced, for example, by the popularity of the idea of a citizens’ initiative referendum within the ‘yellow vests’ movement in 2018 (see e.g. https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2018/12/07/qu-est-ce-que-le-referendum-d-initiative-citoyenne-demande-par-des-gilets-jaunes_5394287_4355770.html).

11 In particular, their satisfaction with the current government or the country’s economic and social situation. Thus, according to the *IPSOS exit poll conducted during the 2005 referendum*, among voters who voted ‘no’, key motivations included, for example, considerations such as ‘you are dissatisfied with the current economic and social situation in France’, ‘you wish to express your dissatisfaction with the political class in general’ or ‘this is an opportunity to oppose the government and Jacques Chirac’.

12 Or the European Communities before it. This is particularly the case in Ireland, where a Supreme Court ruling (*Crotty v. An Taoiseach*, 1987) required a referendum to ratify the Single European Act in 1986, setting a precedent for the future: Ireland therefore also held referendums on the Treaties of Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon. However, this Supreme Court case law has not been extended to accession treaties, even though these also fall within the scope of primary EU law.

tably lower, or even negligible. It is therefore highly likely that most citizens will not vote on the basis of a rational assessment of the issues at stake for France, for the Union and for the country concerned, or of the latter's own merits in relation to the accession criteria. They will most likely vote based on their views on enlargement in general (including their feelings about past enlargements) or their overall attitude towards European integration. As the issue of enlargement – particularly where a country little known to the French is concerned – is of very marginal importance to citizens, there will inevitably be a strong temptation to use this referendum to express views on matters of greater concern to them, or to punish those responsible for putting the question to the vote.

It is precisely this risk – given that any enlargement requires unanimous ratification by all Member States – that makes this approach politically indecent. There is a fundamental asymmetry in the stakes between the candidate states and the member states. On the one hand, the fate of the country is at stake, a fundamental geopolitical choice, the culmination of efforts made over years, even decades. On the other, the expression of a mood, perhaps regarding the general state of the European Union, certainly concerning the domestic political situation. Of course, the risk that the fate of a people might be held hostage by political clashes within a state that already benefits from the European project also exists in the context of parliamentary ratification, but it is incomparable to the uncertainties inherent in a referendum.

Added to this asymmetry of stakes is an asymmetry of consequences. If accession is rejected by the candidate country itself, this is a serious problem for that country, but one that is purely internal. For the Union and its members, this would amount to nothing more than a minor setback, and there would be little impact on relations with the state concerned¹³. Conversely, if the rejection comes from the Union, the consequences

would inevitably be serious and negative, on several levels. It would be a severe blow to the Union's credibility and to trust between Member States¹⁴. But rejection by a Member State would have particularly devastating consequences for bilateral relations with the candidate country concerned. This can be observed – on a smaller scale – in the vetos cast earlier in the process, such as in the Bulgarian-Macedonian case, or by looking at the consequences of the French veto in 2019: a resentment that is still palpable today in Macedonian public opinion. Looking further back, De Gaulle's double veto on British accession also left a lasting mark on public sentiment across the Channel. However, in these cases, the effects are mitigated by the fact that the decisions are attributable to a President, a government or political parties. However, if the rejection stems from a referendum, it is the decision of an entire people. This is another outrage: asking one people to judge another. This approach – which risks pitting one European people against another – is entirely at odds with the fundamental idea of the European project, namely the desire to promote an 'ever closer union among the peoples of Europe'.

Finally, depending on whether this referendum-induced deadlock occurs at the start or, conversely, at the very end of the accession ratification procedures underway in other EU Member States, its impact will also be more or less politically devastating, but in any case significant. Consequently, the prospect of a French rejection at the end of their efforts is already causing concern among the candidate countries.

III • How can we escape this trap?

For all the reasons outlined above, the simplest and most appropriate solution would be to simply repeal this 'circumstantial' article, introduced for outdated political reasons and without its long-term effects having been anticipated at the time. In the unlikely but desirable event of such a constitutional revision, several options could be considered.

¹³ As was seen in 1972 and 1994 with Norway.

¹⁴ Let us recall here the crisis caused by General de Gaulle's two vetoes (1963, 1967) for relations between the Six. More recently, we are offered a glimpse of this by the consequences of the Union's difficulties in overcoming Hungarian obstacles in the accession negotiations with Ukraine.

I OPTION 1: SIMPLY REVERT TO THE SITUATION PRIOR TO 2005

This would involve not only abandoning the referendum route, but also sticking to ‘normal’ ratification, not treated as a constitutional revision (i.e. a simple majority of votes cast in each of the two chambers). This solution would have the merit of treating today’s candidates fairly in comparison with those of the past. Indeed, would it not be preferable to be able to tell the Albanians or Montenegrins, to name just the two countries furthest along the process, that the procedure for ratifying their accession treaties remains the same, in France as elsewhere, as that applied to the Slovenians in 2004, the Bulgarians in 2007 and the Croats in 2013? By amending its Constitution in this way, France would send an extremely strong political and symbolic message to all candidate countries, thereby helping to lend credibility to and consolidate the current momentum.

The full logic of this scenario would also require clarifying the situation that initially inspired it, namely Turkey’s candidacy, which is now at an impasse and has in practice been abandoned.

I OPTION 2: INTRODUCE GENUINE FLEXIBILITY

Even a compromise solution – less favourable than the previous one, but more favourable than the false flexibility of 2008 – would be a welcome gesture through which France could demonstrate its now constructive and responsible attitude towards enlargement. This could involve reviving one of the ideas discussed in 2008:

- Replace the current wording of Article 88-5 with a reference to Article 89 (the proposal by the Baladur Committee, included in the draft constitutional bill tabled by the Fillon government¹⁵). A referendum would then be mandatory only in the event of parliamentary ratification by simple majorities in both chambers. Conversely, there would be no referendum

if the accession treaty were ratified by a three-fifths majority of parliamentarians sitting in Congress, with the choice between the first and second options resting with the President of the Republic.

- Limiting the obligation to hold a referendum to accessions likely to substantially alter the internal balance of the Union (taking demographic weight into account, for example). However, whilst this would certainly send a positive signal to the Balkan countries, the effect would be exactly the opposite for Ukraine.
- Alternatively, the revision could at least reverse the logic of the current wording: instead of requiring parliamentarians to vote to rule out a referendum, the referendum should be made conditional upon a request expressed by a significant number of elected representatives and/or citizens (see the 2008 proposal by the rapporteur of the Committee on Foreign Affairs above). But even then, this change would probably reassure few candidates.

Given the current political situation, as well as the time remaining before France’s next presidential election, the prospect of such a minor constitutional amendment—removing or at least easing the French burden weighing on the future of further EU enlargements—seems unlikely. Unless awareness of the geopolitical stakes rises another notch, allowing sufficient political will to emerge? After all, the entire procedure leading to the adoption of the 2008 constitutional revision took only three months – roughly the same amount of time that was needed, more recently, to enshrine the right to abortion in the Constitution. The difficulty lies in the balance of power within Parliament and the influence of tactical calculations ahead of the presidential election. Nevertheless, in theory, if French MPs and senators were to decide to vote in line with the positions defended at European level by their political groups, as expressed within the European Parliament or the European Commission, the three-fifths majority in Congress should be well within reach. But it must be acknowledged that,

¹⁵ See Article 33 of *the Draft Constitutional Bill on the Modernisation of the Institutions of the Fifth Republic*, No. 820, tabled on 23 April 2008: ‘Article 88-5 of the Constitution is replaced by the following provisions: “Art. 88-5. – Any bill authorising the ratification of a treaty relating to the accession of a State to the European Union and the European Communities shall be adopted in accordance with the procedure laid down in the second and third paragraphs of Article 89.”’

particularly on the centre-right, this scenario seems rather unrealistic: the LR's stance on enlargement¹⁶ appears to be significantly at odds with the EPP's mainstream position at European level. That said, would a compromise based on one of the options mentioned above—which were put forward in 2008 by UMP MPs—not at least be conceivable?

If constitutional revision proves politically impossible, must we resign ourselves to waiting for the first accession treaty to see whether a referendum might yield a positive result, or whether parliamentarians will, when the time comes, have the political courage to rule out this possibility and allow ratification in Congress? And then live with this uncertainty for every subsequent treaty? In short, if no other creative solution is found, France, the European Union and the candidate states will be condemned to a series of political dramas that will provide opportunities for all manner of attempts at interference and destabilisation by hostile actors. This is why consideration must also be given to other possible solutions – perhaps less conventional, perhaps less effective too, but preferable to passively waiting for a potential crash that is already on the horizon.

EXPLORE ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS

The current wording of Article 88-5 is all the more problematic in that it explicitly refers to 'the ratification of a treaty pertaining to the accession of a state to the European Union'. In other words, it dictates both the wording of the question and the timetable. Once again, the French will be asked not to express their views on a principle based on a simple question ("Are you in favour of country X joining the Union?"), but to ratify a lengthy, highly technical text that is unreadable to non-specialists¹⁷. This is a godsend for the supporters of all the 'no' campaigns, as diverse in their motivations as possible,

as we saw with the Constitutional Treaty in 2005: in such a document, it is easy to find a sticking point and inflame the debate on that issue amongst a section – however small – of the electorate. The sum of these partial 'no' votes, which are often mutually incompatible, risks systematically outweighing a simple relative majority of citizens prepared to vote 'yes' in the name of the overall vision, despite elements they do not approve of. Furthermore, by linking the referendum to the ratification of the accession treaty, it is brought in at the very end of the process, that is to say at a time when the political fallout from a potential French 'no' would be particularly devastating, as it would be deeply frustrating for the candidate country concerned.

OPTION 3: A REFERENDUM TO... GIVE UP ON THE NEXT ONES

If the constitutional reform adopted by Congress proves unrealistic, one alternative worth serious consideration could be to push it through... by referendum. Indeed, if parliamentarians dare not remove the referendum requirement for fear of being accused of silencing the people, they might as well ask the people to do it themselves. The outcome of such a referendum would obviously be highly uncertain, but this scenario would have numerous advantages over a series of referendums on the various accession treaties:

- The President of the Republic would remain in control of the timetable and could choose the most opportune moment to minimise the risk of the referendum being hijacked for political ends.
- Should the referendum reject this reform, the result would at least provide clarity and raise awareness: no one could ignore the political risk that the French referendum poses to the enlargement process. This clarification would come sufficiently early

¹⁶ See Chopin, T.; Lequesne, C., Macek, L.: 'The enlargement of the European Union and the reforms it entails: the state of reflection and public debate in France', Policy Paper, Jacques Delors Institute, November 2025

¹⁷ It should be noted here that when it comes to moving forward (by amending the founding Treaties or accepting a new accession), the referendum is always conducted in this manner. Conversely, in the opposite case of Brexit, the British voted on an extremely broad concept (remaining in or leaving the European Union, without any definition of the practical terms of a potential departure), which allowed both the critics of EU as a neoliberal machine and the supporters of a 'Singapore-on-the-Thames' to rally behind the 'Leave' campaign. If the same logic applied to 'de-enlargement' as is applied to enlargement, the British would have had to vote on the treaty setting out the terms of the 'divorce' between the United Kingdom and the EU-27. The result would probably not have been the same.

in the process to allow time to respond with appropriate measures.

- The referendum would focus on a principle: whether it is desirable and legitimate for a referendum to be held automatically in France for every future accession. This would allow the debate to focus on the essentials and on an overall view of the issues surrounding future accessions, rather than debating the image of specific candidate countries or more or less technical details.
- Furthermore, referendums aimed at ratifying accession treaties allow no room for manoeuvre regarding the question put to the vote. And they concern a treaty negotiated by the 27+1, making it extremely difficult to amend in order to make concessions before or after a referendum held in a single Member State. A referendum revising the Constitution, on the other hand, offers some flexibility regarding the wording of the text put to the French people (see the options outlined above). Thus, under Article 89 of the Constitution, the French would be asked to vote on a text that would be the result of a compromise between political forces allowing, at the very least, adoption by a simple majority in each of the two chambers of the Parliament. This would considerably increase the chances of a 'yes' vote.
- As for the drawbacks, the main one would be that, should the referendum reject the reform, it would become even more difficult to use the procedure introduced in 2008: if the French people reaffirm their commitment to the idea that they must have the right to veto any future enlargement, it would be even more difficult for MPs to vote for a motion stating that a people's vote is not necessary.

OPTION 4: A CONSULTATIVE REFERENDUM ON THE PRINCIPLE OF FUTURE ENLARGEMENTS

Another approach would be to specifically help MPs to take this decision when the time comes. Here too, this would involve holding a referendum, but rather than putting a constitutional reform to the vote, the question could concern a position of principle regarding future enlargements, without being linked to the ratification of a specific text – neither an accession treaty nor a constitutional revision. It would therefore be a consultative referendum. The question could, for example, be worded as follows: 'Are you in favour of [*list of countries to be put to the French people on this occasion*] joining the European Union in the coming years, on a date set specifically for each of these states according to their own merits and once the relevant European institutions and all current Member States consider that the conditions for accession have been met?'

This approach would also make it possible to control the timetable and steer the debate towards questions of principle and an overall view of the issues at stake. Citizens would be asked to express a general opinion on the merits of enlargement, considering a specific selection of countries concerned, thereby allowing controversial issues (starting with Turkey) to be set aside, whilst also avoiding a fragmented debate and the risk that responses might vary from one candidate country to another (for reasons not necessarily linked to their actual merits¹⁸). If such a referendum were to yield a positive response from the French people, it would amount to a kind of authorisation in principle that the French would grant to the relevant institutions – both European and national – to proceed with future enlargements, should they deem the conditions to be met. If the result were negative, then at least the clarification would come early on and force everyone to face reality – thereby enabling appropriate political solutions to be found.

¹⁸ As it is likely that future enlargements will not take the form of a 'Big Bang' as in 2004, the French would risk having to vote in referendums on different countries at different times. This obviously creates a significant risk that, for two accessions that are objectively very similar, the French might give two different answers, depending on the context in which the vote takes place – which would make the situation regarding candidate states even more complicated.

IV • Tackling the root of the problem: reconciling the French people with enlargement

None of the approaches outlined above is entirely satisfactory. They merely serve to mitigate the risks arising from the trap set by the 2005 constitutional reform. And they do not address the underlying problem: the deep disaffection that has been allowed to take root between the French people and the EU enlargement process¹⁹. This disaffection is largely linked to a lack of understanding of the subject and the absence of a meaningful, serious and sustained public debate – today, as in the past. Thus, Croatia’s accession in 2013 went almost entirely unnoticed – even though the entry into the EU of a country directly involved in the post-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s offered an opportunity to recall the European project’s mission and peace-making power. Even more seriously, the ‘Big Bang’ of 2004–07 did not receive in France the attention commensurate with its historical and geopolitical significance. The long and demanding process that preceded it was not explained or presented to the French public, which allowed the false and unfair notion to take root that enlargement had been decided on the sly and botched.

It is this confusion that must be addressed without delay, regardless of whether there will one day be one or more referendums on enlargement, or not. For it is not merely a question of preventing the enlargement process from going off the rails, but also, and above all, of reconciling the French people with the European Union as it has developed and taken shape since 1989²⁰. The war in Ukraine, the shift in US policy under Trump’s second presidency, and all the threats arising from the current state of the world present a historic opportunity.

Here are several proposals for tackling this challenge:

- Organise an annual debate on enlargement in the National Assembly and the Senate, following the example of the Netherlands: every year, in response to the publication of the European Commission’s ‘enlargement package’²¹, Dutch parliamentarians draft their own report on enlargement and hold a debate on it. This would have the merit of obliging MPs (and therefore political parties) to take a stance and articulate a public discourse on this issue. Furthermore, an annual event dedicated to enlargement – especially if it seeks to maximise its visibility, for example by inviting the European Commissioner for Enlargement to a public hearing in the National Assembly – would undoubtedly attract more media attention.
- Encourage initiatives by civil society and local authorities. It is essential to stimulate debate at the local level. A fund specifically dedicated to raising awareness and promoting debate on future EU enlargements should be established, drawing on national (both French and those of candidate countries, which have a strategic interest in seeing this debate develop in France well in advance of the day when their accession treaties are to be ratified) and European budgetary resources, with the aim of supporting a large number of small local projects – led by local authorities, associations, etc. – designed to raise the profile of the enlargement project, increase knowledge of the countries concerned and foster a debate on the arguments for and against enlargement and the options available regarding its implementation.
- Establish a structure to mobilise stakeholders and maintain interest in the run-up to potential future referendums. This could take the form of a combination of a civil society forum and a citizens’ convention. Admittedly, EU enlargement is currently a low-profile issue, and a

¹⁹ See in particular: Thierry Chopin, Lukáš Macek, Sébastien Maillard and Jacques Rupnik: ‘L’Europe d’après. Pour un nouveau récit de l’élargissement’ in *Esprit*, May 2020; Chopin, T.; Lequesne, C., Macek, L. (op. cit.)

²⁰ See also: Christian Lequesne, *France in the New Europe. Embracing the Change of Scale*, Presses de Sciences Po, 2008.

²¹ A collection of documents published annually in the autumn, assessing the progress of candidate countries on the path to EU accession. For example, here is the 2025 ‘enlargement package’: https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/commission-reports-progress-aspiring-eu-members-2025-11-04_fr

certain degree of proactive effort would undoubtedly be required to establish and run such a structure. But the possibility (or even the likelihood) of a referendum alone justifies mobilising citizens and civil society through such a structure, the very existence of which would encourage the various actors (political parties, trade unions, NGOs) to grasp the importance of the issue, take a stance and raise awareness among their members.

- Create and maintain an up-to-date database, available online, listing exchanges (university or school partnerships, town twinning schemes, etc.) and other initiatives linking French organisations with partners from one or more of the candidate countries. This task could be entrusted to the secretariat of the aforementioned forum/convention and would help foster the emergence of initiatives likely to benefit from funding from the fund proposed above.

Beyond these very concrete and practical initiatives, political actors who declare themselves in favour of enlargement should adopt a more comprehensive, proactive political stance, drawing on current events and the European context that go beyond the single issue of enlargement. This naturally concerns, first and foremost, the war in Ukraine and the structural responses to the questions it poses to Europeans, as well as Europe's ambition to become an independent, respected and effective geopolitical actor.

It is also important to resume work on EU reform – which seems to have lost momentum

since the publication of [the report by the Franco-German group of independent experts](#) – by viewing it not as a prerequisite for future accessions, but by seeing these as an opportunity: indeed, certain institutional reforms of the EU could be directly incorporated into future accession treaties. In any case, it seems important to also take into account the concerns of a section of French public opinion that sees enlargement as a source of paralysis in the European decision-making process. Rethinking the method of enlargement by fully embracing the idea of 'gradual accession²²' also appears to be a key avenue for reconciling the French public with enlargement. Finally, it is worth noting that the possible rapid accession of Iceland could help to spark a debate on enlargement and the geopolitical imperatives driving it today.

* * *

Given the time it is likely to take for the accession process to be completed, even for the countries that are currently furthest along the path, it is not too late. But it is certainly not too early either: the lack of a significant and sustained effort to make future enlargements acceptable to a majority of the French public is currently undermining the credibility of France's support for this process. For future accessions to succeed, it is above all the candidate states that must make major, sustained efforts. But it is essential that the Member States also play their part. In France's case, this means not underestimating the risk posed by the prospect of referendums on the accession treaties.

BOX 1. The French referendum on the first enlargement of the European Communities

The only referendum ever held in a Member State to ratify an accession treaty took place in France on 23 April 1972. It concerned the accessions of Denmark, Ireland, the United Kingdom and Norway (the latter did not ratify it: 53.5% of Norwegians voted 'no'). The French voted overwhelmingly in favour of this first enlargement: 68.32%. The decision to ratify via a referendum was a response to a very specific context: it was intended to allow Georges Pompidou to overturn the two vetoes imposed by his predecessor.

22 See in particular these publications from the Centre Grande Europe:
https://institutdelors.eu/content/uploads/2025/04/PP290_Adhesion-graduelle_Macek_EN.pdf
<https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/enlargement-needs-an-associated-state-status/>
<https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/gradual-accession-to-the-eu-its-time-to-turn-words-into-action/>

BOX 2. France's ratifications of the 2004, 2007 and 2013 accessions

The accession of the 10 new Member States, which took effect on 1 May 2004, was put to a vote in the National Assembly on 26 November 2003: of the 577 MPs, 527 took part in the vote. 505 voted in favour, 3 against, and 19 abstained.

The law authorising the ratification of the accession treaties of Bulgaria and Romania was adopted unanimously by the National Assembly on 27 June 2006.

On 17 January 2013, the National Assembly also unanimously adopted the law authorising the ratification of Croatia's accession treaty.

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