

A TEST OF TIMES

Permachange through enlargement and EU reform

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The inside story

The European Union has entered an era of consecutive, compounding crises – permacrisis – that puts its agility to the test. To remain relevant inside and outside Europe, the EU27 must embrace the logic of ‘perchange’: constantly adapting in response to transformative crises. Confronted with fundamental (geo-)political and (geo-)economic shocks, the enlargement and reform imperatives are a proving ground for the EU and its members.

Many doubtful voices in Brussels, EU capitals and aspiring member states argue that the Union will not be able to widen and deepen in the coming years. They are convinced that current and potential future EU countries lack the political will and stamina to make this possible.

We disagree. **Europeans can again determine their collective future.** They are not condemned to become irrelevant at the regional and global level. They lack neither options nor agency when it comes to expanding and upgrading the Union. It is a matter of political choice.

Like the two strands of the Union’s DNA, enlargement and internal EU reform are necessary and should be thought together. To make good on its membership promise to the current candidates, the Union must adapt its operating system. But to make its governance fit for the future, the EU should ‘think enlarged’, towards a Union of 30+ members.

In fact, the prospect of enlargement ‘only’ reinforces the Union’s reform imperative. In the era we live in, the EU as we know it finds itself in a do-or-die situation. To make the Union enlargement-, future- and crisis-proof, the EU and its members should follow a gradual internal reform approach that enables the Union to progressively adapt its operating system and core policies.

Even if the final reform outcome cannot be predicted from today’s perspective, **Europeans must overcome the present institutional stalemate and complacency by providing new impetus to reform. This process should start now and develop gradually over time.** Increasing the clarity and predictability of the internal EU reform path is required to persuade national capitals to commit to revamping the Union.

If some EU governments block a further deepening of European integration, the ‘willing and able’ members should intensify their level of cooperation via an Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde (OSGA) outside the EU framework (if necessary). In the immediate future, the OSGA will be especially necessary in the area of defence or in case some EU countries/leaders veto enlargement.

By doing its own ‘homework’, the Union would live by example, motivating aspiring member states to meet the accession criteria. It would also help to restore the damaged credibility of the European perspective offered to these countries. **The EU should commit to pursuing internal reform and enlargement in tandem through successive waves, adjusting the speed and ambition of the two mutually reinforcing processes in line with the evolution of wider global developments.**

But increasing threats to Europe’s security might force us to be even bolder: **if incrementalism cannot allow the EU27 to turn the situation around quickly enough to effectively cope with mounting external pressures, the Union should integrate all current and dedicated EU-hopefuls in one ‘big wave’ in the coming years.** Doing so would temporarily forego a strict interpretation of the present merit-based enlargement approach, as well as the need to wait on the EU to reform first. Yet, reform shortcomings and the risk of democratic backsliding should be duly addressed post-accession, once new members have joined the Union.

Ultimately, whether the EU27 opt for a gradual or wholesale widening, it needs to muster the political will to welcome new members instead of focusing on further revisions to the methodology for enlargement. The policy should be redefined as a means for the EU to mature politically in a challenging geopolitical context, strengthening the number of allies working together for peace, prosperity, fundamental rights and liberal democracy on the European continent. The concrete steps, resources and timeframes that will allow the Union to progress on the enlargement dossier – in stages or at once – should be clarified without delay.

This is not a drill. **EUrope must pass the test of times, taking on both enlargement and internal reform with courage and ambition,** because its own relevance and survival are at stake. History is calling – but will Europeans come to the rendezvous?

This paper seeks to inspire, promote and link the debates on how to widen and deepen European integration in the coming years. Starting from the assumption that enlargement and internal EU reform are normative imperatives, it explores potential avenues to advance both processes (strategic options), identifies the most suitable (combinations of) strategic options, and presents 12 concrete recommendations on how to implement enlargement and internal EU reform in practice in the years ahead.

Extended summary

European integration is a story of constant change and evolution. In the past, multiple rounds of widening have gone hand in hand with a deepening of the European Union (EU), always against the backdrop of major historic events. Today, once again, the EU and its members face external (geo-)political and (geo-)economic shocks, major transformations linked to climate, technological and demographic change ('poly-transition'), and fundamental challenges related to the future of liberal democracy. Responding to these dynamics requires embracing the logic of 'perchange': accepting that the EU27 will have to constantly adapt in response to transformative crises. **To remain relevant in this new era, Europe must pass the test of times by living up to the enlargement and reform imperatives.**

The EU has long recognised enlargement as a geostrategic investment in peace, stability and prosperity on the continent. Yet, over the past decade, **the EU27 has become ever more hesitant to extend the Union's borders**, due to internal preoccupations with the 'permacrisis' – the long series of successive crises since 2007/2008 – and uneasiness with the potential negative consequences of further EU widening.

Russia's brutal and illegal invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought back with a vengeance the strategic geopolitical imperative to widen and deepen the Union. In response to the European *Zeitenwende*, the Union has been strong on rhetorical commitment to enlarge the EU but short on detail of how it plans to reconcile the intention of overseeing a transformative enlargement process with the urgency of enhancing the effectiveness of an EU of 30+ members.

After all, in an era defined by instability, uncertainty, fragmentation and polarisation, upgrading the EU's internal operating system to weather ongoing and future challenges and crises is not just an option but a necessity.

The prospect of enlargement 'only' reinforces the Union's reform imperative. The resulting gap between discourse and reality breeds mutual distrust between current and aspiring member states, which in turn hampers progress on EU widening and deepening. Consequently, a change in the *status quo* approach is required to ensure that the enlargement imperative can be squared with the ambition of pursuing a process that exerts reform leverage both on the EU-hopefuls and the Union itself in the years to come.

But what are the Union's potential strategic enlargement and reform options? And which options should the EU27 choose and implement? This paper identifies

and evaluates four strategic EU enlargement options and five strategic EU reform options, and presents recommendations on how to widen and deepen European integration. These options are not scenarios because they do not aspire to predict the future. Instead, they aim to sketch how EU enlargement and reform could progress based on conscious political choices.

FOUR STRATEGIC EU ENLARGEMENT OPTIONS

- (E1) Speedy Big Bang Enlargement (Maximalists)** foresees one big wave of enlargement in the coming years, including all aspiring members who demonstrate the willingness and readiness to do what it takes to join the EU. The proponents of this option view one all-encompassing round of accession as indispensable for Europe's security in the current geopolitical environment and argue that the transformative leverage of the policy cannot be restored in time to justify waiting for candidates to meet all the membership conditions prior to entry.
- (E2) Strategic Regatta (Ambitious Realists)** advocates incremental but substantial progress on enlargement starting in the current politico-institutional cycle (2024-2029), with aspiring member states joining the EU in consecutive waves, as they fulfil the conditions set and as the Union itself gradually prepares for their accession. It builds on the existing 'regatta' principle and methodological approach to enlargement but broadens the current technical focus of the policy and shines a spotlight on the power and share of responsibility that EU countries have to deliver enlargement.
- (E3) Limited Enlargement (Minimalists)** builds on the assumption that the best way to respond to the geopolitical *Zeitenwende* is to focus on the accession of Ukraine. The advocates of this option argue that the accelerated accession of Kyiv will be an arduous task, and that the Union should save its remaining energy to deal with other key challenges rather than committing itself to a large number of new entries.
- (E4) No Enlargement (Denialists)** rests on the assumption that the EU will or should not enlarge beyond its current borders. Some advocates of this option believe that attempts to widen the EU are not realistic, while others want to actively prevent the accession of candidate countries, given the immense political, economic and financial costs and/or security risks that further EU widening entails.

FIVE STRATEGIC EU REFORM OPTIONS

(R1) Fundamental Reform Now (Maximalists) starts from the premise that whether or not the EU enlarges, the Union's current operating system is not equipped to deal with multiple external and internal challenges. This option advocates for an immediate EU deepening, which encompasses a substantial strengthening of the EU's supranational governance structures via a European Convention to make it fit for the future.

(R2) Gradual Progressive EU Reform (Ambitious Realists) assumes that the EU requires an ambitious but also realistic reform of its key policies and governance structures. It maintains that an incremental reform process, focusing first on what is most feasible and necessary while not excluding more in-depth internal reforms, is also justified given the uncertainties surrounding EU enlargement. Coalitions of the willing should be able to deepen their level of cooperation, even if this might have to extend beyond the EU framework.

(R3) Lisbon Plus (Cautious Realists) assumes that the EU is enlargement- and crisis-proof. Its supporters argue that the Lisbon Treaties can accommodate both necessary internal reforms and the absorption of potentially new members by advancing the Union based on provisions included in the existing EU Treaties (including the *passerelle* clauses and the instruments of differentiated integration).

(R4) Status Quo (Minimalists) builds on the assumption that the EU can continue to operate without changes to its existing institutional set-up and in line with its current main policy directions. Supporters of this option claim that experience has proven that the EU and its members can successfully weather serious storms on the basis of the Union's current operating system.

(R5) Europe of Fatherlands (Re-nationalists) advocates that the EU should stop moving towards an "ever closer Union" (Article 1 TEU) and that adaptations should be used to re-nationalise competences wherever possible. According to the proponents of this option, the EU should perform a radical U-turn by undoing past mistakes (including Schengen and the single currency) and fundamentally reducing the role of supranational EU institutions.

LEADING NOWHERE: INSUFFICIENT AND UNREALISTIC OPTIONS

Which of the above strategic enlargement and reform options should Europe follow? This paper argues that **six of the nine strategic options would either not be compatible with the enlargement and reform imperatives or fail the test of political feasibility:**

- ▶ **The Limited Enlargement option (E3) would not suffice to make the Union and its vicinity stronger and safer.** It would be interpreted by remaining aspiring member states as a breach of trust which, in turn, would make the EU an unreliable partner, push disappointed candidates to seek alternative alliances and effectively remove the Union's transformative leverage in these countries. The EU's ambitions as a global player would also suffer with this option.
- ▶ **The long-term consequences of the No Enlargement option (E4) for both the EU and aspiring member states would be disastrous in strategic and security terms.** If the Union were to bar its doors and leave countries outside to their own fate, it would go against its very *raison d'être*, undermine its strength and image abroad, and likely end up with a less secure, predictable and developed neighbourhood. Most candidates would probably not welcome alternative forms of engagement that stop short of full EU membership.
- ▶ **If EU countries followed the radical Europe of Fatherlands option (R5), the enlarging Union would not be able to collectively respond to the manifold challenges and crises which Europe is and will be confronted with in future.** This option would undermine the achievements of European integration and lead to a dangerous re-emergence of nationalism, which is not in the interest of current and future member states.
- ▶ **The Status Quo option (R4) would fail to acknowledge that the EU is neither enlargement- nor future- and crisis-proof.** The Union's current governance structures are not strong enough to deal with the unfolding existential (geo-)political, (geo-)economic and democratic challenges. It would be naive and dangerous to believe that the EU will always be able to prevent fundamental crises from spiralling out of control if the Union's operating system remains unchanged.
- ▶ While it might be the most realistic reform path, **the Lisbon Plus option (R3) offers no guarantee of the political will among member states to exploit the legal possibilities provided by the current EU Treaties.** Since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaties in 2009, the EU27 have been unable to agree on whether or how to use the *passerelle* clauses or the differentiation instruments enshrined in the EU's existing primary law. Whether this will change in future is more than doubtful.
- ▶ If the Lisbon Plus option is insufficient and the pressures to reform the EU immense, the **Fundamental EU Reform Now option (E1)** would seem the preferred way forward. However, despite many wake-up calls during the last two decades, **a radical reform of the EU including a European Convention has not been on the cards** and most member states – including both pro- and anti-EU forces – remain (highly) reluctant to follow such an ambitious reform path.

THE WAY FORWARD: STRATEGIC PATHS TOWARDS ENLARGEMENT AND REFORM

By the process of elimination, one strategic EU reform option – **Gradual Progressive EU Reform (R2)** – and two strategic EU enlargement avenues – **Speedy Big Bang (E1)** and **Strategic Regatta (E2)** – are left standing.

- ▶ **The Gradual Progressive EU Reform option (R2)** would enable the EU to adapt its operating system with the aim of making it **enlargement-, future- and crisis-proof**, while Europe navigates through a highly volatile and uncertain environment in the coming years. A gradual approach commencing in the current politico-institutional cycle would provide a middle ground, offering the perspective of a potential amendment of the current EU Treaties, a careful adaptation of the EU's operating system, and the possibility for the 'willing and able' to advance if other member states resist an "ever closer Union". It would also allow the EU to adapt its reform path according to the needs of an enlarging Union – whether it expands via the Strategic Regatta or Speedy Big Bang option.
- ▶ **The Strategic Regatta option (E2)** would allow the EU to **interlock its merit-based approach to enlargement with the more recent geopolitical urgency to widen the Union**. The incrementalism defining this option gives hesitant member states time to accept the need to adapt the EU's operating system to new realities and reassures countries that fear the accession of hasty – and thus unprepared – new members. The fact that enlargement and internal EU reform are pursued in tandem creates a virtuous circle in which the two processes reinforce each other. Moreover, the two tracks can be adjusted in terms of speed and ambition in response to the evolution of wider geopolitical developments.
- ▶ **The possibility offered by the Speedy Big Bang enlargement option (E1) to integrate all current aspiring member states** that are eager to join can send a **strong political signal that the EU is determined to consolidate and secure its sphere of influence in response to tectonic geopolitical shifts** linked to developments related to the war in Ukraine and Trump 2.0. This option recognises that pursuing the same course of action and expecting different results is misguided, especially when the geopolitical imperative cannot wait for the leverage of EU membership to start bearing fruits.

Like the two strands of the Union's DNA, enlargement and internal EU reforms should be thought together. To make good on its membership promise to the current candidates, the EU must adapt its operating system. But to make its governance fit for the future, the EU should 'think enlarged', towards a Union of potentially 30+ members.

So how can the three identified strategic enlargement and internal EU reform options be applied? This paper puts forward **12 recommendations on how these strategic options and their combinations can be implemented in practice.**

SEVEN ENLARGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Enlargement recommendation #1: The Union and its members should **adopt a new enlargement narrative**, depicting the policy as a means for the EU to mature politically in a challenging geopolitical context and as a way to strengthen the number of allies working together for peace, prosperity, fundamental rights and liberal democracy in Europe.

Enlargement recommendation #2: EU countries should **muster the political will to welcome new members in the coming years** instead of focusing on new revisions to the enlargement methodology. A technical process – as strict and rigorous as it may be – will never suffice to deliver a larger EU without strong political resolve, an unshakable vision of a joint future and a lot more generous institutional and financial incentives from the Union.

Enlargement recommendation #3: The Directorate-General for Enlargement should lead in the **elaboration of an EU Enlargement Roadmap** to clarify the steps, resources and timeframes that will allow the Union to progress on enlargement in the short to medium term. This Roadmap should be linked to a Comprehensive EU Reform Plan aiming towards concrete and parallel adaptations of the Union's operating system.

Enlargement recommendation #4: To ensure that alignment with the EU *acquis* continues also after countries have joined the Union in the context of a Speedy Big Bang enlargement, the accession treaties signed and ratified between the EU and each candidate should include clearly defined **Post-Accession Reform Plans**. These Plans should spell out the precise process, key milestones and concrete steps (including their timing) that each country must take inside the Union before it can enjoy all benefits and rights associated with full membership.

Enlargement recommendation #5: The EU should **strengthen existing mechanisms and reform Article 7 (TEU) to keep all members on track with the EU's foundational democratic values and principles**. The Union's enhanced approach to the enlargement policy remains more a pre-emptive strategy than a proven system to ensure that pre-accession reforms are sustainable post-accession. Moreover, experience shows the potential exists for any member state to undermine EU democratic standards, not just newcomers. Thus, the Union needs more effective mechanisms to protect its liberal democratic values and constructive European cooperation.

Enlargement recommendation #6: Since bilateral issues among aspiring member states and between candidates and existing EU countries can (continue to) disrupt the enlargement process, the Union should **set up safeguards against bilateral conflicts**. It should also introduce a 'Confidence Clause' to prevent new members from blocking new accessions in the future.

Enlargement recommendation #7: The EU and its members should **offer more help to bottom-up forces in the candidate countries, including citizens and civil society**. The EU should not only do more to acknowledge and assist citizens and civil society organisations (CSOs) in dealing with their domestic grievances. It should also ensure that they are in a solid position to hold domestic political elites to account and contribute to a larger extent to their countries' European integration efforts.

FIVE REFORM RECOMMENDATIONS

Reform recommendation #1: Preparations for a Gradual Progressive EU Reform require the **elaboration of a Comprehensive EU Reform Plan**, which is more ambitious and concrete than what is currently on the table. To make the Union enlargement-, future- and crisis- proof, this Plan should: (1) adapt the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and cohesion policy; (2) upgrade EU financing, both inside and outside of EU frameworks; (3) direct the implementation of core EU priorities, including competitiveness and defence, to the needs of an enlarging EU; (4) elaborate a Dynamic Reform Roadmap with concrete implementation stages and milestones; (5) foster the gradual integration of candidates; and (6) promote a progressive EU governance reform in the years to come.

Reform recommendation #2: To inject a new lease of life into the EU reform debate and break the existing deadlock among the member states, the European Council should mandate an independent authority – either a 'Wise Wo|Men Group' or an eminent personality – to elaborate an **EU Governance Reform Report**. The Report should conceptually prepare a reform of the Union's governance structures and help to promote the political buy-in among member states and between EU institutions. The independent authority should be asked to identify which treaty amendments it deems necessary.

Reform recommendation #3: To gradually upgrade the enlarging Union's operating system, the EU27 should be **open to all possible reform avenues**. The five reform paths are: (1) technical, functional and governance adaptations; (2) full exploitation of possibilities for reform enshrined in the Lisbon Treaties, including the *passerelle* clauses and the instruments of differentiated integration (enhanced cooperation; PESCO); (3) targeted surgical treaty amendments; (4) institutional adaptations via EU accession treaties; or (5) fundamental treaty reforms via the ordinary revision procedure, including a European Convention.

Reform recommendation #4: If some governments block further EU deepening, the 'willing and able' should be able to proceed. If progress cannot be achieved within the EU framework on the basis of existing differentiation instruments, due to the unanimity requirement in the (European) Council, coalitions of the willing should intensify their level of cooperation via the creation of an **Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde (OSGA)** outside the EU framework, while adhering to a set of predefined principles that ensure respect for the Union's institutional set-up and the community method. Key non-EU partners and potential future member states should be involved as much as possible in those differentiated areas. The creation of an OSGA is particularly urgent in defence and in case some EU governments decide to block enlargement. If some EU leaders would, for example, not allow Ukraine to join the 'club', those in the EU who are ready to integrate Kyiv might be compelled to use the possibilities offered by an OSGA to substantially extend their level of support to and cooperation with Ukraine.

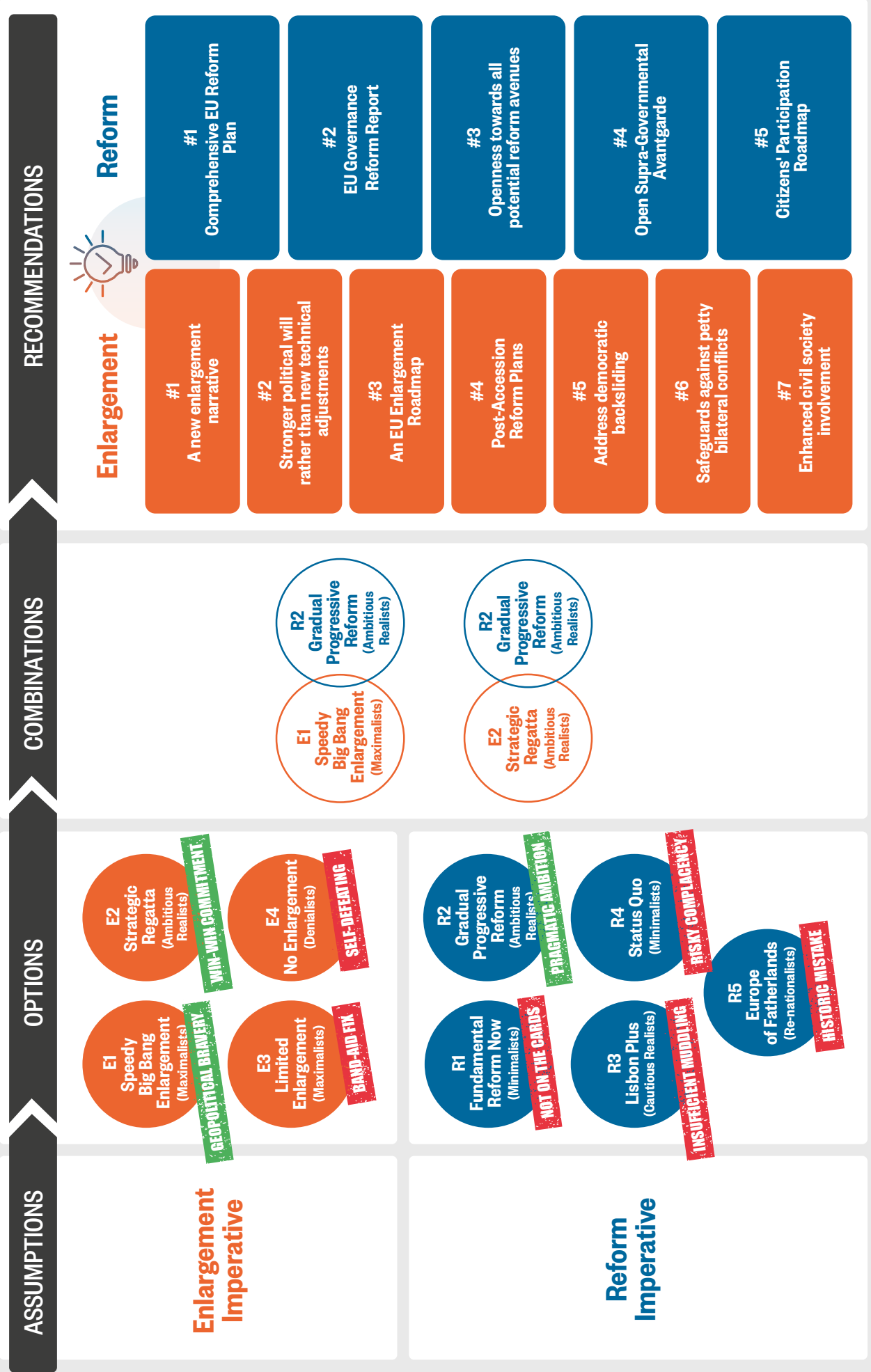
Reform recommendation #5: To generate broad public debate and buy-in, the Union should elaborate a **Citizens' Participation Roadmap** allowing citizens from current and future EU members to participate in discussions about the enlargement and EU reform. The Roadmap could include: (1) a European Citizens' Reform Panel to accompany the EU's internal reform process; (2) a European Forum on Enlargement to intensify transnational debates about EU widening; and (3) Future of Europe Debates inviting the heads of state and government of the EU27 and candidates to share their views on the future of Europe in the European Parliament.

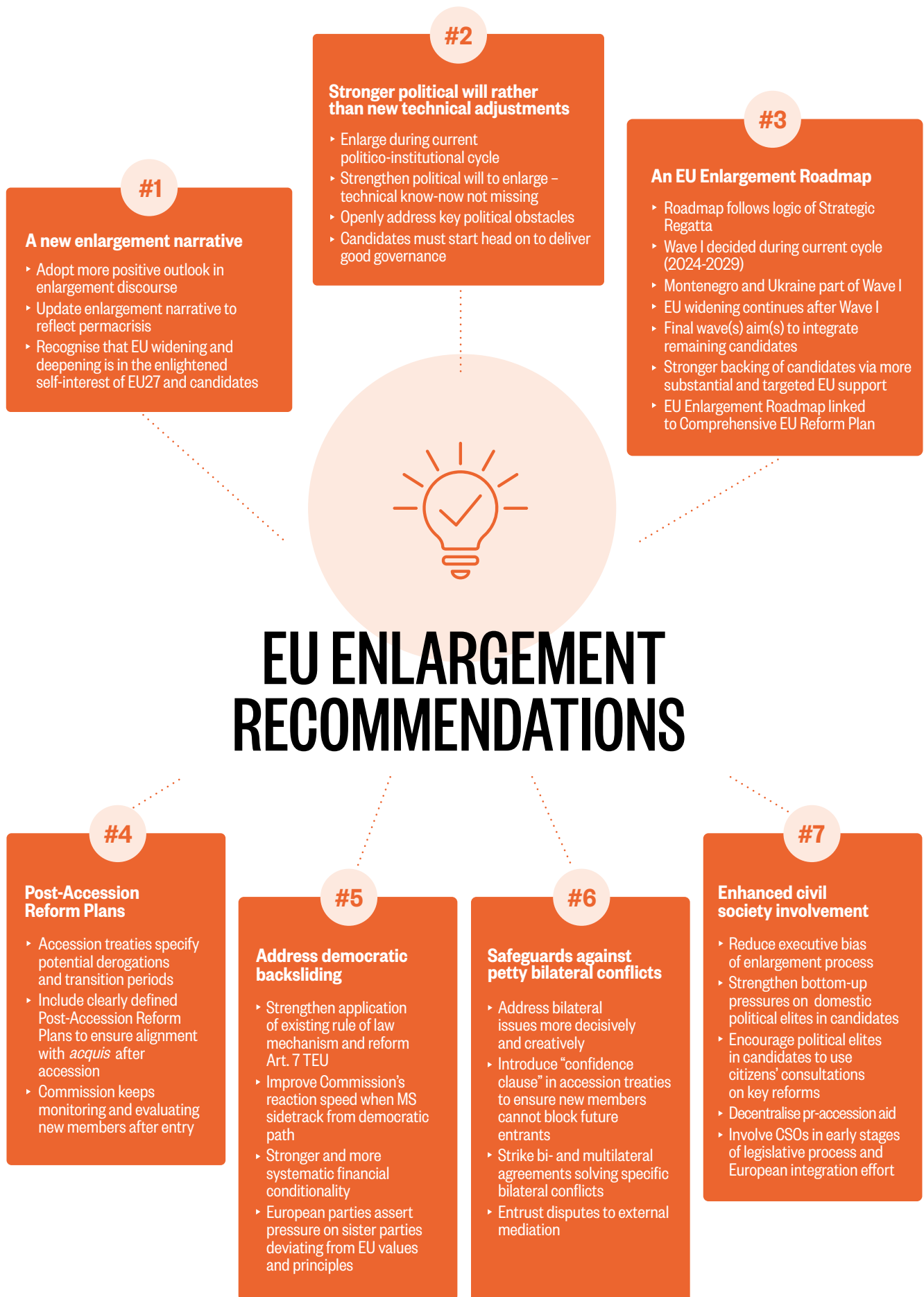
A RENDEZVOUS WITH HISTORY

Europe must expect the worst and prepare for it without taboos. In this new era, the Union and its members should embrace 'perchange', taking on both EU enlargement and EU reform with courage and ambition. By thinking that history was on our side, many leaders failed to foresee, let alone react to, the dramatic turn of events that is transforming our familiar world. Yet the Union and its members still have the chance to get on the right side of history by doing whatever it takes now to secure a liberal, prosperous and peaceful order on the continent. History calls on the EU to respond to the enlargement and internal reform imperatives – but will the Union and its members be courageous enough to come to the *rendezvous*?

Figure 1

A TEST OF TIMES - INFOGRAPHIC







List of abbreviations

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy	EUCO	European Council
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy	HR/VP	High Representative / Vice-President
CoFoE	Conference on the Future of Europe	IBAR	Interim Benchmark Assessment Report
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy	IGC	Intergovernmental Conference
CSO	Civil Society Organisation	LT	Lisbon Treaties
DG	Directorate-General	MFF	Multiannual Financial Framework
ECJ	European Court of Justice	MS	Member States
EDF	European Defence Fund	NGEU	NextGenerationEU
EEAS	European External Action Service	OSGA	Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde
EIB	European Investment Bank	PESCO	Permanent Structured Cooperation
EMU	Economic and Monetary Union	QMV	Qualified Majority Voting
EP	European Parliament	RRF	Recovery and Resilience Fund
EPC	European Policy Centre	SPV	Special Purpose Vehicle
EPF	European Peace Facility	TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
ESM	European Stability Mechanism	TEU	Treaty on European Union
EU	European Union		

EU Enlargement Options

E1	Speedy Big Bang Enlargement (Maximalists)
E2	Strategic Regatta (Ambitious Realists)
E3	Limited Enlargement (Minimalists)
E4	No Enlargement (Denialists)

EU Reform Options

R1	Fundamental Reform Now (Maximalists)
R2	Gradual Progressive Reform (Ambitious Realists)
R3	Lisbon Plus (Cautious Realists)
R4	<i>Status Quo</i> (Minimalists)
R5	Europe of Fatherlands (Re-nationalists)

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1. History calling

European integration is a story of constant change and evolution. Over the course of history, both endogenous and exogenous factors have driven evolutionary processes that grew the original European Communities of six founding countries to today's European Union (EU) of 27 member states, operating on the basis of the Lisbon Treaty. At present, again, **fundamental European and global developments call upon Europe¹ to embrace the logic of permachange**: that the Union and its members will have to constantly adapt in response to complex and transformative crises.

Up till now, **multiple rounds of widening proceeded against the backdrop of major historic events**, including the collapse of military regimes in Southern Europe, the fall of the Iron Curtain in Central and Eastern Europe, or the wars in the Balkans. And the gradual increase of member states went **hand in hand with a constant deepening of European integration²** (see Figure 4). The creation of the Single Market supported by substantial cohesion and regional policies occurred in parallel to the Southern enlargement in the 1980s, followed by the Nordic and Austrian accessions of 1995. The introduction of the single currency, a deepening of cooperation in the area of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and new initiatives in the field of justice and home affairs were all codified in the 1993 Maastricht Treaty. This was followed by attempts to promote European growth and jobs under the Lisbon Agenda and the Constitutional Convention (2001-2003), which eventually paved the way for the 'big

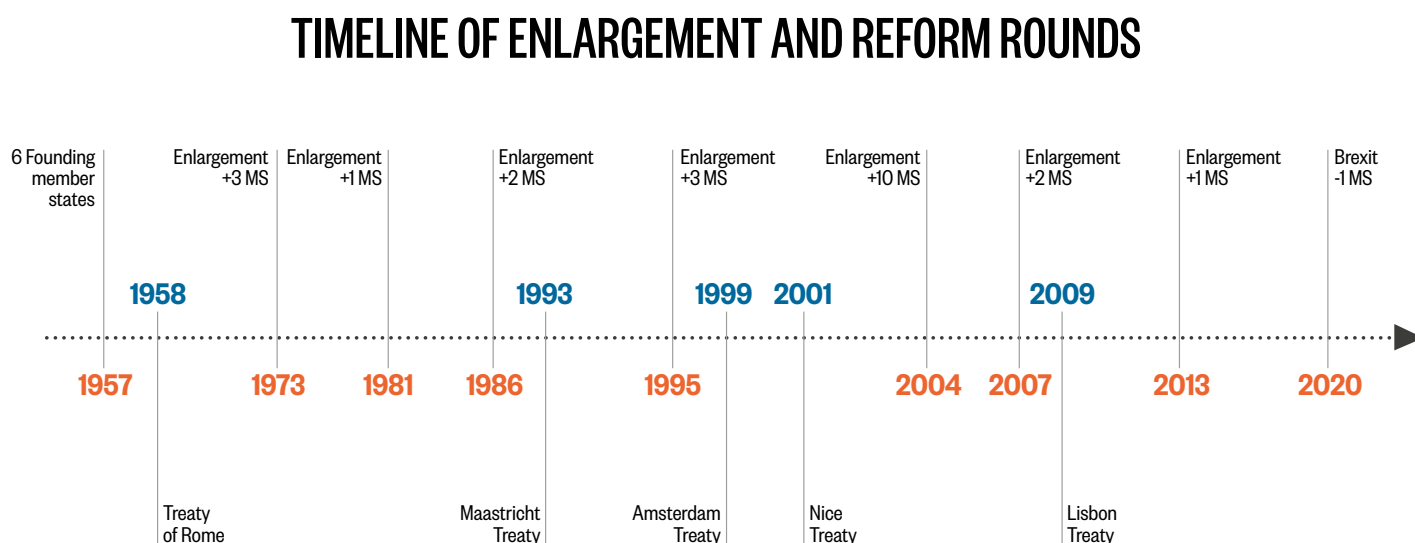
bang' enlargement in 2004 and 2007, and the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaties in 2009.

Today, once again, **radical changes driven by internal challenges and external shocks are pressuring the EU and its members to move forward**. Fundamental (geo-)political and (geo-)economic developments, major transformations linked to climate, technological and demographic change ('poly-transition'), challenges related to the future of liberal democracy in Europe and beyond, as well as the cumulative effects of a long series of successive crises since 2007/2008 ("permacrisis"³), have all substantially increased the need to widen and deepen European integration.

EU Europe needs to answer this call of history. This paper seeks to contribute to the debate about the ways in which the Union can do so, by analysing the potential future paths ('strategic options') towards both EU enlargement and internal EU reform. It also puts forward a set of concrete recommendations on how EU widening and deepening can be synchronised and reinforce each other in the coming years.

If Europe wants to be a relevant actor in its neighbourhood and at the global level, it needs to stand the test of times by living up to two major imperatives, which are also the two basic normative assumptions guiding the paper: (1) the enlargement imperative and (2) the reform imperative.

Figure 4



1.1 THE ENLARGEMENT IMPERATIVE – ABANDONING THE *STATUS QUO*

The European Union has long recognised enlargement as a **geostrategic investment in peace, stability and prosperity in Europe**. Decades of experience had turned this narrative into a core belief. After all, bringing Greece, Portugal and Spain into the European Community's fold in the 1980s facilitated the consolidation of democracy in these countries; opening the doors to the Central and Eastern European states in the 2000s enabled their peaceful post-communist transitions after the Cold War; and offering the European perspective to the Western Balkans in 2003 helped to end conflict in the region. Today, again, EU members need to make use of the geopolitical tool of enlargement.

In recent times, **internal preoccupations with the permacrisis, lesser external geopolitical pressure, and the lessons learned through the various rounds of EU widening** about the risks of admitting new members with unresolved border disputes or poor governance standards **made member states gradually more intransigent on the conditions for accession and very wary about precipitous new entries**. As a result, no country has joined the Union since Croatia became a member in 2013.

In February 2022, **Russia's brutal and illegal invasion of Ukraine brought back with a vengeance the strategic geopolitical imperative to expand the Union's borders in the enlightened self-interest of current and future member states**. The EU and its

members saw Russian President Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine and Moscow's active ambition to widen its zone of influence in other parts of the continent as a major upset to the European project, directly undermining the Union's core objectives, i.e. to promote peace, democratic values and the well-being of its people (Article 3, Treaty on European Union (TEU)).

Russia's brutal and illegal invasion of Ukraine brought back with a vengeance the strategic geopolitical imperative to expand the Union's borders.

The EU responded by promptly extending the **membership promise to the Eastern trio** consisting of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, while keeping its offer conditional on the aspirants' fulfilment of existing political and economic criteria.⁴ But the record-time decision to grant candidate status to these new aspiring member states was essentially a **geopolitical reflex, driven by events and established practice, rather than by a well-thought-out, collective EU strategy** for the future. This does not make the outcome any less historically significant. But it also does not provide much clarity to the stubborn irritants that had kept the enlargement process stagnant for decades.

INFOBOX 1: STATE OF AFFAIRS OF EU ENLARGEMENT POLICY

There are currently nine EU candidate countries. Five of them were granted candidate status before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022: Türkiye (1999), North Macedonia (2005), Montenegro and Serbia (2010), and Albania (2014). The other four received it in the aftermath of the Russian aggression: Ukraine and Moldova (June 2022), Bosnia and Herzegovina (December 2022), and Georgia (2023). In addition, Kosovo applied for membership in December 2022 but is still waiting for the European Commission to issue an opinion on its application.

Six of the candidates have opened accession negotiations with the EU – the process by which countries are expected to align their national legislation with the *acquis communautaire*. The accession talks are structured in 35 chapters. As a result of the Revised Enlargement Methodology introduced in 2020, these chapters are now grouped into six thematic clusters. Montenegro

and Serbia started accession negotiations in 2012, Albania and North Macedonia in 2022, and Ukraine and Moldova in 2024. Bosnia and Herzegovina received the green light for the opening of talks in 2024, provided that it first meets certain pending requirements. Last but not least, Türkiye began negotiating with the EU in 2005, but talks were halted in 2018 on account of stalling or reversing progress in the country's reform process.

To enter the Union, the Commission must validate that the respective candidate has successfully transposed and is implementing EU legislation in all the thematic clusters. The Council must then unanimously endorse the Commission's *avis*. Montenegro has signalled its intention to close accession negotiations by the end of 2026, while Albania declared 2027 as its envisioned accession date – a timeline that the Commission has considered ambitious but achievable.⁵

Despite a clear rhetorical commitment to the need to enlarge, **the much-heralded ‘new momentum’ has so far not translated from Sunday speeches and declarations into Monday’s reality.** For now, the EU has been short on details of how it plans to reconcile a transformative enlargement process for the candidates with the urgency of delivering on the policy and the importance of ensuring that a 30+ Union remains functional.

Moreover, the current discourse seems to assume consensus among all relevant stakeholders regarding the priority of delivering enlargement and doing whatever is required to reach that end. **While the European Commission remains a staunch advocate of further EU widening, some member states are more agnostic – not all EU capitals are convinced of the necessity of a (quick) expansion and some even hope that the Union will not be (substantially) enlarged** in the foreseeable future (see also Strategic EU enlargement Options 3 and 4).

The gap between discourse and reality leads to a lack of trust in the enlargement policy both among the EU27 and in the aspirant countries: member states are unsure that those who want to enter the Union will do the required work to meet the conditions for accession; and candidate countries do not trust that the EU27 are serious about, or able, to enlarge. **Mutual distrust hampers progress on the dossier, as well as in the EU reform process aiming to prepare the Union for expansion.**

A change in the *status quo* approach to the policy is required, one that manages to square the enlargement imperative with the need to ensure that the process has transformative leverage.

Enlargement is and will always be a merit-based process. But geopolitics linked to the war in Ukraine and to the fundamental threats to Europe’s security can hardly wait for an exacting conditionality to turn aspirant countries into virtuous member states. Strategy and merit cannot always simultaneously prevail. These two variables risk frustrating the newfound momentum in the long run. For this reason, **a change in the *status quo* approach to the policy is required, one that manages to square the enlargement imperative with the need to ensure that the process has transformative leverage both on the EU-hopeful countries and on the Union itself.**

1.2 THE REFORM IMPERATIVE – EMBRACING STRUCTURAL CHANGE

Major global (geo-)political and (geo-)economic developments, the challenges related to the poly-transition and the uncertain future of liberal democracy, as well as the consequences of a long series of successive crises since 2007/2008 have substantially increased the stakes of intensifying European integration and cooperation. **Independently of a potential enlargement to 30+ members, the Union must adapt its operating system and core policies to the new era.⁶ The question is not if but to what extent, when, and under which conditions the EU should internally reform itself in the coming years.**

Independently of a potential enlargement to 30+ members, the Union must adapt its operating system and core policies to the new era.

From the financial crunch (2007/2008) and the subsequent sovereign debt crisis (2010-2015), through the annexation of Crimea (2014), the uncontrolled inflow of migrants and refugees (2015/16) and Brexit (2016-2020), to the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021), the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine (since 2022), the escalating crisis in the Middle East (since 2023), and now the challenges related to the re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States (US),⁷ **the Union and its member states have been in constant crisis management mode for over 15 years.**

In response to the relentless series of interrelated crises (“permapolycrisis”⁸), the EU and its members have always individually and collectively tried to prevent the situation spiralling out of control. Under severe pressure, they laid the foundations for the banking union (2012), negotiated the ‘EU-Turkey deal’ on migration (2016), managed the UK’s exit from the Union (2020), agreed on NextGenerationEU (NGEU) and the Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF) (2020), provided unprecedented financial, humanitarian and military assistance to Ukraine, and imposed 16 sanction packages against Russia (since 2022).

But the temptation to regard incremental progress achieved via *ad hoc* crisis reactions as a feasible and sustainable strategy to forge ahead with European integration ignores the scale and scope of current and

future problems confronting the EU27. **It would be dangerous to trust that the ‘crisis automatism’⁹ witnessed in previous phases of the permacrisis will always work in future.** It would be naive to assume that the EU and its members will always be able and willing to collectively do what is required when the pressure is so high that the Union has no choice but to go the extra mile to avoid the worst. In fact, **one cannot exclude that the Union might in future fail to step back from potential cliff edges**, especially if EU-critical political forces assume (more) power at the national level, including in key member states like France, Germany, Italy, Poland or the Netherlands, boosted by the new US administration in the era of Trump 2.0.¹⁰

In the present context of global instability, uncertainty, fragmentation, and polarisation, **one should assume that Europe and the world will continue to be confronted with fundamental crises challenging Europe’s security, sustainability and prosperity.** As such, the enlarging Union will have to ensure that the EU’s operational system remains effective to allow current and future generations to cope with the (geo-)political, (geo-)economic, democratic challenges, and unexpected crises ahead.

In times of “radical change”¹¹, a reform of the EU’s operating system and core policies is not an option but a necessity. The prospect of a Union of 30+ member states ‘only’ reinforces the Union’s reform imperative. **But it remains to be seen whether European integration will continue to be piecemeal and driven by *ad hoc* improvisation rather than underpinned by the willingness and ability of the EU and its members to implement change in a more systematic and structural manner.**

It would be dangerous to trust that the ‘crisis automatism’ witnessed in previous phases of the permacrisis will always work in future.

1.3 KEY OBJECTIVES AND STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

This paper does not provide the silver bullet, because magic solutions do not exist. Instead, it **seeks to inspire, promote and link the debates on how to widen and deepen European integration in the coming years.** Starting from the assumption that EU enlargement and internal EU reform are normative imperatives, it aims to **(i) explore potential avenues to advance both processes, (ii) identify the most suitable (combinations of) strategic options, and (iii) present concrete recommendations on how to implement EU enlargement and EU reform in practice.** To push the boundaries of the current conversation on this topic, the paper combines ambition and realism by setting out and promoting desirable, as well as feasible, potential strategic options.

In times of “radical change”, a reform of the EU’s operating system and core policies is not an option but a necessity.

Following the introduction (Part 1), this **paper identifies the potential strategic options for EU enlargement and EU reform.** These strategic options are not scenarios – they do not aspire to predict the future. Rather, they aim to sketch out how EU widening and deepening could progress in the coming years based on conscious political choices. Part 2 lays out the basic narratives and key characteristics of four potential strategic EU enlargement options and five potential strategic EU reform options. The paper then **discusses and eliminates those potential strategic EU enlargement and EU reform options that are not responsive to the two key imperatives outlined in the introduction or that seem unfeasible** in the current political context (Part 3). Hence, the paper argues that three strategic options and their combinations are best suited to move the European integration process towards enlargement and reform: **Gradual Progressive EU Reform (R2) and Strategic Regatta (E2) or Speedy Big Bang (E1) enlargement.** On that basis, Part 4 presents a set of 12 recommendations on how the identified (combinations of) strategic options can be implemented in practice.

2. Strategic options for EU enlargement and EU reform

2.1 FOUR STRATEGIC EU ENLARGEMENT OPTIONS – BASIC NARRATIVES AND KEY CHARACTERISTICS

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has triggered a European and global *Zeitenwende*, which summoned up the geopolitical logic of EU enlargement and refocused attention on a previously sidelined dossier. Yet, **despite the acclaimed imperative to widen the Union, the process aimed to deliver enlargement is not clear and could suffer setbacks**, given its incongruous objectives and the lack of broad political endorsement among the EU27.

Supporters of enlargement seem to take for granted that the accession process can be simultaneously (i) merit-based to transform candidates into constructive new members, (ii) a driving force of internal EU reform to ensure that a 30+ Union remains functional, and (iii) sufficiently expeditious to answer the call of history. This is a big assumption, which makes the task of delivering enlargement exceedingly difficult, especially as not all member states support these objectives – some question not only the urgency but the very need to expand the EU. Given the unanimity requirement to make headway on the dossier, the lack of consensus could effectively render a widening of the Union impossible. **The enlargement policy thus needs a new departure from the *status quo* approach to respond to today's critical imperatives.**

A contentious, inter-governmental dossier par excellence

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, enlargement has decisively moved up the Union's agenda. It features prominently in the European Council's Strategic Agenda for 2024-2029, which specifies that the EU "will follow a merit-based approach to accession with tangible incentives" and that "in parallel, the European Union will undertake the necessary internal reforms."¹² In a similar vein, enlargement is mentioned as a "moral, political and geostrategic imperative", as well as a merit-based process in the European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's political guidelines for the European Commission 2024-2029.¹³ **In reality, this rhetorical endorsement of the policy blurs differences of opinion on the subject between both EU institutions and member states, as well as among national capitals.** Thus, its translation into practice is neither straightforward nor a done deal.

EU institutions, especially the European Commission, have traditionally been more supportive of moving the enlargement process forward than member states. This disparity has in time fed **distrust in national capitals of the Brussels executive.** In contrast to the 2004 and 2007

enlargements, EU capitals have grown more critical of the Commission's reports for painting a rosier picture of reform progress in the countries aspiring to membership than the reality on the ground.¹⁴ They have also come to rely more often on opinions from national parliaments or external agencies (e.g. Europol) – rather than the Commission's *avis*¹⁵ – at key decision-making moments on the dossier.

Moreover, **member states' positions on the enlargement dossier have become increasingly driven by a mosaic of national considerations** that have more to do with the vagaries of their domestic politics than with outstanding challenges pertaining to the candidate countries.¹⁶ As witnessed over the past decades, member states have allowed issues such as geographic proximity, historical affinities or animosities, bilateral issues, economic and political ties with the candidates, as well as preoccupations linked to the state of minority groups, sustainability of national welfare systems, public opinion or electoral politics to influence their position on enlargement when deciding on whether or how to advance in the process. As such, they diverged in functional terms from agreed standards and procedures, with unpredictable outcomes for the policy.

This trend is probably here to stay given that, in the age of illiberalism and permacrisis, national political dynamics are unlikely to allow greater convergence among member states' perceptions on the urgency, format and terms of delivering enlargement. But it is also expected to continue because **enlargement is an inter-governmental dossier par excellence, and a process in which the member states in the (European) Council and national parliaments in the domestic arenas have the last word.** There is no reason to expect them to renounce that prerogative in the future. But if the policy continues unchanged, the combination of fickle and powerful EU countries offers no certainties as to which aspiring member states will get in, when and under what conditions, even if enlargement might now be heralded as a geopolitical imperative.

Strategy and merit: a hard circle to square

The second reason why the current momentum for widening the EU is not a foregone conclusion relates to the way in which the enlargement goal has been framed: time-sensitive, merit-based and 'digestible' for the Union. Making sure that expanding the EU's borders to 30+ members conforms to any of these individual characteristics is already a tall order; reconciling the different standards set for this ambition is a real brain teaser.

So far, under the weight of political considerations in a geopolitical context transfixed by Russia's war in

Ukraine, EU capitals have managed to come together more swiftly and decisively than in previous crises to advance the enlargement dossier. Milestones that took decades for the Balkans to reach (e.g. candidate status and the opening of negotiations with the EU), were accomplished in just a couple of years by the Eastern trio. And although the Balkan countries moved forward as well during the same period, **rapid progress seems difficult to sustain in the future if candidates are to be judged exclusively against strict political and economic membership criteria.**

Georgia has already missed the opportunity to start accession talks because of democratic shortcomings and a still-warring Ukraine might find it challenging to continue sailing through an accession process that is more complex and rigorous than ever before. Moreover, in the East and Balkans alike, conditions linked to persistent problems of democratic governance, corruption, bilateral disputes, or statehood issues take time to address, and the EU does not have ready-made solutions for them. The experience of the Balkan countries suggests that **the longer the process drags on, the more aspiring member states lose motivation to reform**, especially when EU capitals fail to come through with due rewards for legitimate progress and when the incentives (e.g. Growth Plan¹⁷) are not generous enough to compensate for delays.

Thus, **reconciling strategy and merit is no easy feat.** If the prospect, scope and timing of the EU's own reform process is also factored into the preparations for a (more) functional

Union of 30+ members (see also section 2.2), a one-way street to deliver enlargement becomes implausible under the *status quo* approach. Instead, at the intersection between member states' wide range of positions and considerations about the policy and individual candidates; their various risk perceptions related to the urgency of advancing on the dossier; their diverging views on the type of EU reform linked to further EU widening; and the aspirants' own levels of willingness and capacity to fulfil the membership conditions, the road ahead contains many forks.

At this juncture, which potential paths could the EU and the candidates follow when enlarging the Union in the coming years? Given the different preferences and positions regarding the future of European integration, this paper identifies **four strategic options and their associated group of supporters: (1) Speedy Big Bang Enlargement (Maximalists); (2) Strategic Regatta (Ambitious Realists); (3) Limited Enlargement (Minimalists); and (4) No Enlargement (Denialists).**

Member states' positions on the enlargement dossier have become increasingly driven by a mosaic of national considerations.

Figure 5



2.1.1 Strategic EU enlargement option 1 (E1): Speedy Big Bang Enlargement – Maximalists



- ▶ One big enlargement wave in coming years including all candidates willing to join
- ▶ Geopolitical pressures too great to postpone EU enlargement – cannot wait for membership conditionality to work, given that it does not produce results, especially on complex and sensitive issues
- ▶ Accession of willing candidates not conditioned on strict interpretation of merit-based principle
- ▶ Current and future member states jointly agree to gradual Post-accession Reform Plans in EU and new member states

This strategic option foresees **one big wave of enlargement in the coming years, including all candidates which demonstrate the willingness and readiness to do what it takes to join the EU.** The proponents of this option view a Speedy Big Bang Enlargement as indispensable for EUrope’s security in the current geopolitical environment. They hold that the transformative leverage of the policy in the candidate countries cannot be restored in time for the Union to meet the enlargement imperative if the EU does not deviate fundamentally from the current *status quo*.

According to this option, **the deterioration of the geopolitical situation** due to Russia’s neo-imperialist ambitions, the growing influence of external actors in the Western Balkans, the state of affairs in the Southern Caucasus, and a potential further escalation of the conflict in the Middle East underscore the growing security risks facing the Union. The Maximalists also hold that the return of Donald Trump to the White House demonstrates that Europeans can no longer rely on the US as a credible partner in Europe and beyond, which **obliges the EU27 to assume greater responsibility for the stability and security of EUrope.**

Faced with this new transatlantic reality, but also with the prospect of sharing a very long, direct border with Russia along the lines of Ukraine’s frontier, those who advocate for a Speedy Big Bang Enlargement believe that the EU should take the bold strategic decision of integrating, in the foreseeable future, all current aspiring member states that are prepared to do what it takes. **Such a catch-all strategy is perceived as the best way to anchor them in the Union and away from Russia’s orbit.**

The alternatives, including a slow, limited or no enlargement (along the lines of strategic EU enlargement options 2-4), are seen from this standpoint as leaving the EU and the countries in its vicinity highly vulnerable in an increasingly volatile and threatening geopolitical context.

This strategic enlargement option does not exclude the possibility that Russia might retaliate, including by dragging the EU into more direct, conventional or unconventional, hybrid forms of confrontation. However, the **Maximalists hold that the long-term benefits of a Speedy Big Bang Enlargement outweigh the consequences of a potential hostile reaction from the Kremlin.** As such, this option

lays a high premium on the geopolitical urgency of EU enlargement to defend and promote EUrope’s fundamental security interest in the long run.

From the perspective of those who promote this strategic option, **the geopolitical pressures are so great at present that EU enlargement cannot be postponed until the candidates and the Union are fully ready.** As such, the new members join with different levels of preparedness regarding existing democratic criteria, public administration standards and/or market alignment. **Their shortcomings are not ignored or written off but, in this option, their accession is not conditioned on a strict interpretation of the merit-based principle.** Same for the EU, which makes a conscious choice to expand rather than waiting until the Union has (substantially) adapted its governance structures, core policy areas, and common financial resources available at the European level.

Maximalists believe that the enlargement process should abandon the ‘business as usual’ approach, given that this prevailing logic will not allow the EU27 to turn the situation around quickly enough to effectively respond to ongoing geopolitical tensions.

The proponents of this option argue that the sluggish pace of the accession process over the past years and member states’ wavering on the dossier have dented the credibility of the membership perspective and trust in the merit-based character of the process. Short on credibility, the leverage of the policy has been waning as well, which in turn has undermined the readiness of enlargement countries to carry out fundamental reforms and resolve bilateral and statehood issues. Consequently, **Maximalists believe that the enlargement process should abandon the ‘business as usual’ approach, given that this prevailing logic will not allow the EU27 to turn the situation around quickly enough to effectively respond to ongoing geopolitical tensions.** In a similar vein, they argue that the EU and its members will

not be able to swiftly bridge (all) their differences regarding the nature and scope of internal reforms when **the global and European *Zeitenwende* forces them to enlarge the Union faster than they would under normal conditions.**

But even in the case of a Speedy Big Bang enlargement, the EU and its members will have to find ways to carry on with internal EU reforms in parallel to the process of new members joining the ‘club’. Pro-European advocates of this enlargement option thus hold that **current and future EU countries should jointly plan a gradual improvement of the Union’s operating system and of the situation in the new member states post-accession.** To prevent unresolved issues confronting the candidates and the EU from hampering the Union’s effectiveness and thwarting the new members from making the most of their accession, **EU members and aspirants should**

commit to undertaking any necessary and pending reforms in due time, but after a Speedy Big Bang Enlargement. They should agree on a comprehensive reform plan including a clear roadmap as well as incentives and guarantees to reassure both current and future member states that accession is a win-win exercise (see also strategic EU reform option 2 (R2) and EU reform recommendations #1-3).

In addition, some Maximalists even argue that a deepening of European integration and cooperation could materialise among the ‘willing and able’, even if not all EU countries are ready to support a move in this direction. However, if progress would not involve all member states (at least not from the outset), these forms of cooperation outside the EU framework should be open to candidate countries before and after they have joined the Union.

2.1.2 Strategic EU enlargement option 2 (E2): Strategic Regatta – Ambitious Realists



E2
Strategic
Regatta
(Ambitious
Realists)

- ▶ EU27 have political will and stamina to implement consecutive accession waves
- ▶ Composition and timing of waves depends on candidates' ability to fulfil conditions
- ▶ Wave I takes place during the current politico-institutional cycle
- ▶ EU widening continues after Wave I and final waves include all remaining candidates willing and able to join
- ▶ More generous financial and institutional incentives to sustain reform momentum, especially for later waves
- ▶ Internal EU reform interlinked with enlargement waves

This strategic enlargement option foresees **incremental but concrete progress on enlargement in the coming years, with aspiring member states joining the Union in consecutive waves**, as they fulfil the conditions set and as the EU itself gradually prepares for their accession. It builds on the existing ‘regatta’ principle¹⁸ and methodological approach to enlargement but broadens the current technical focus of the policy to capitalise on its political aspects. More specifically, this option shines a spotlight on the power and share of responsibility that current member states have to make enlargement happen.

Preparing candidates for membership by having them adopt and implement EU laws and standards remains a largely technical exercise. However, Ambitious Realists remind others that enlargement is an inter-governmental dossier *par excellence*, in which the member states have the last word on all decisions in the process. Over the past decades, EU capitals have used that right to diverge in functional terms from agreed procedures for reasons that have more to do with their national politics than progress made by the EU-hopeful countries. **Member states’ interference has produced uncertain outcomes in the dossier, blocking or delaying the process.**

Proponents of this option thus argue that **the EU27 should play a more constructive role in the future, offering strong reform incentives to candidate**

countries and rewarding them adequately once conditions are met, while also pushing for gradual internal EU reform to accommodate a progressive widening of the Union to 30+ members (see also strategic EU reform option 2 (R2)).

In essence, the Strategic Regatta option proposes a blueprint for how the current discourse on enlargement – as a merit-based process and geopolitically-driven urgency – could become reality. To that end, **Ambitious Realists hold that the EU27 must give better consistency to the ‘fair’ element of the ‘strict and fair’ mantra** that has come to define the EU’s approach to enlargement in recent years. For the proponents of this option, a **fairer enlargement entails the following three key elements:**

- ▶ **Predictable process:** Membership conditions stop being a moving target. The EU and its members stick to pre-defined standards and procedures when assessing whether candidates should advance on the EU track and align their official statements with the actual situation on the ground in the candidate countries.
- ▶ **Steadfast commitment:** The EU27 take action to incentivise and reward reforms in the accession countries and gradually welcome new members into the Union, starting in the current politico-institutional cycle (2024-2029).

- **Reciprocal effort:** The Union leads by example and not only asks aspiring member states to implement difficult reforms but also does its own homework to ensure that the EU's operating system will be (more) functional with 30+ countries in an increasingly challenging regional and global environment.

Ambitious Realists argue that **only by making enlargement policy truly 'fair' can a strict approach transform the EU-hopeful countries into 'good' member states** – that is constructive and devoted to making European integration work. From their perspective, fairness helps to restore the credibility of enlargement and the Union's standing as a reliable player in its own neighbourhood and at the international level. In this logic, **the more the EU delivers on its commitment to widen the Union, the more candidates will be inspired to do their part, and the success of each accession country becomes a motivation for the next one in line.**

Thus, without contesting the Union's already enhanced methodology for accession,¹⁹ this strategic option calls on the EU27 to **show the political will and invest the national political capital required to support the technical exercise that underpins the enlargement process.** Immediate geopolitical concerns and forward-looking strategic considerations encourage such renewed political investment on the Union's side. And while Ambitious Realists hold that tangible progress is mandatory to implement the Strategic Regatta option in the short- to medium-term, the **gradual nature of the enlargement process foreseen will help to alleviate the concerns of member states** regarding potential undesirable consequences related to new accessions and EU reform.

According to its proponents, **this strategic enlargement option should unfold in several waves, depending on the candidates that manage to fulfil the set conditions** and the extent to which the EU and its members will be ready to move the enlargement and internal reform processes forward. However, the EU27 should commit themselves to sustaining progress and minimising the timeframe in which they aim to deliver on both fronts.

Ambitious Realists argue that only by making enlargement policy truly 'fair' can a strict approach transform the EU-hopeful countries into 'good' member states.

Ambitious realists believe that a first enlargement wave should take place during the current politico-institutional mandate (2024-2029) to make sure that the Union injects positive momentum into the policy at this critical geopolitical juncture. From today's perspective, Montenegro could be part of the next round of EU widening, given that the country is best aligned with the Union's *acquis* and the only one that has received a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR), which paves the way for the final stage of negotiations.²⁰

The proponents of this strategic option hold that Montenegro's accession seems rather straightforward and that its membership could provide a major boost to the overall enlargement process, motivating other candidates to reform and advance towards EU membership.

Ambitious realists believe that a first enlargement wave should take place during the current politico-institutional mandate (2024-2029).

The first enlargement wave could become bigger if the other aspiring member states catch up on reforms during this decade and/or if the geopolitical pressure to enlarge the Union grows substantially. At present, this prospect could include Western Balkan countries like Albania or North Macedonia and/or countries of the Eastern trio. In the light of developments related to the war in Ukraine and given the fundamental challenges to Europe's security following the re-election of Donald Trump, the Union might decide that Ukraine should also join the first enlargement wave.

To integrate these countries into the Union, the EU and its members will have to be sufficiently motivated – or hard-pressed by growing security concerns – to lift the remaining political hurdles, including specific national vetoes or the need for gradually progressing internal EU reforms to allow several new countries to enter the Union.

The advocates of the Strategic Regatta option hold that EU enlargement should not stop after the first enlargement round. On the contrary, candidate countries that were not able to enter the EU in Wave I should join the Union in subsequent rounds of enlargement, provided they fulfil the fundamentals. The timing of a second wave will depend on the candidates' individual progress, the success of Wave I, the ability of the EU to reform, as well as regional and global geopolitical developments. Ambitious realists argue that a second enlargement round will also be closely linked to the Union's ability to persuade individual EU capitals to stop holding the accession process hostage to bilateral disputes with specific candidates.²¹

Building on the success of the first two enlargement rounds, the final wave(s) should include the remaining aspiring member states. From today's perspectives, this could include aspiring member states like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Serbia, or even Türkiye – if EU negotiations with Ankara are re-launched in the future. Currently, these EU-hopefuls struggle most in terms of their ability to fulfil the democratic conditionality, and most of them also face hindering ethnic and statehood problems for which the Union does not seem to have effective solutions at hand.²² To overcome these hurdles, member states would have to double down on their economic and diplomatic efforts to ensure progress, as the nature and scope of the challenges that this group confronts could take a significant amount of time to resolve without a political jolt.

2.1.3 Strategic EU enlargement option 3 (E3): Limited Enlargement – Minimalists



E3
Limited Enlargement
(Minimalists)

- ▶ Focus on Ukraine accession as best way to respond to geopolitical *Zeitenwende*
- ▶ Montenegro might also join as the best-prepared Balkan country
- ▶ EU uses political energy to deal with other key challenges rather than committing to additional new entries
- ▶ Ukraine fulfils fundamentals and commits to deliver outstanding membership obligations after accession
- ▶ EU undertakes reforms prior to enlarging and continues reforms post-accession

This strategic enlargement option builds on the assumption that **the best way to respond to the current geopolitical *Zeitenwende* is to focus on the (accelerated) accession of Ukraine**. Those who want to limit enlargement to Ukraine argue that this will in itself be an arduous task and that the **Union should save its remaining energy to deal with other key challenges rather than committing itself to a large number of new entries**, with all the potential political, economic and financial costs and/or security risks a bigger EU enlargement would entail.

The advocates of the Limited Enlargement option acknowledge that Ukraine's accession would effectively amount to giving this country preferential treatment over all other candidates, but they maintain that **the Union needs to concentrate on Kyiv's fast-track accession, given that Europe is at war and that the front line is in Ukraine**.²³ Some proponents of this enlargement option believe that the accession of a large and dynamic new member state, like Ukraine, with a democratic and geopolitical cause, may even shock Brussels out of its own "constitutional torpor".²⁴ Others, who believe that the Lisbon Treaties are already enlargement-proof, hold that EU reforms should focus only on the most pressing internal adaptations necessary to accommodate Ukraine's EU membership.

The Union needs to concentrate on Kyiv's fast-track accession, given that Europe is at war and that the front line is in Ukraine.

While this option concentrates on Ukraine, **some of those who prefer the Limited Enlargement option argue that member states could potentially also allow Montenegro to enter the Union**, given that it is the best prepared Balkan country. In their opinion, doing so would signal that the EU has not broken its promise towards

the Western Balkans. In reality, from the perspective of this option, the Union would not widen beyond Kyiv and Podgorica, given that additional rounds of enlargement would overwhelm the EU and its members.

While keen to see Ukraine move towards EU membership as fast as possible, **Minimalists hold that the Union must ensure that Kyiv fulfils the fundamentals by asking the country to demonstrate a solid track record of reforms in that regard**. Compliance with other membership conditions can be postponed until after the accession treaty has been signed, provided that the Commission can recommend a pause in the accession process in case Ukraine backslides or disregards the Union's core values. In addition, **Ukraine would have to commit to delivering any outstanding membership obligations within a pre-defined timeframe after it has entered the EU**.

Minimalists caution that it will be crucial for the EU to also provide additional incentives to the remaining candidates to ensure that they stay on course and do not stray away from the Union's sphere of influence.

In the context of this enlargement option, the Union would have to identify ways of engaging with the rest of the aspiring member states, knowing that their EU accession is not on the cards – at least not in the immediate future. **Minimalists caution that it will be crucial for the EU to also provide additional incentives to the remaining candidates to ensure that they stay on course and do not stray away from the Union's sphere of influence**. To do so, the Union should offer these countries more attractive forms of gradual integration and substantially higher levels of financial support.

2.1.4 Strategic EU enlargement option 4 (E4): No Enlargement – Denialists



E4
No Enlargement
(Denialists)

- ▶ EU will not enlarge – either because widening is not realistic or because some member states actively prevent further accessions
- ▶ EU identifies ways to ensure that the situation in the neighbourhood remains stable
- ▶ Assumption that candidates will find it in their interest to cooperate with EU even without membership prospects

This strategic option rests on the assumption that the EU will not or should not enlarge. Some advocates of this option believe that attempts to widen the Union are not realistic. Even if the entry of new members could bring potential benefits, they hold that efforts aiming to enlarge the EU would ultimately fail due to potential rejections by one or the other EU country, given that accession treaties must be ratified by all current and prospective member states.

Some advocates of this option believe that attempts to widen the Union are not realistic. Even if the entry of new members could bring potential benefits, they hold that efforts aiming to enlarge the EU would ultimately fail due to potential rejections by one or the other EU country.

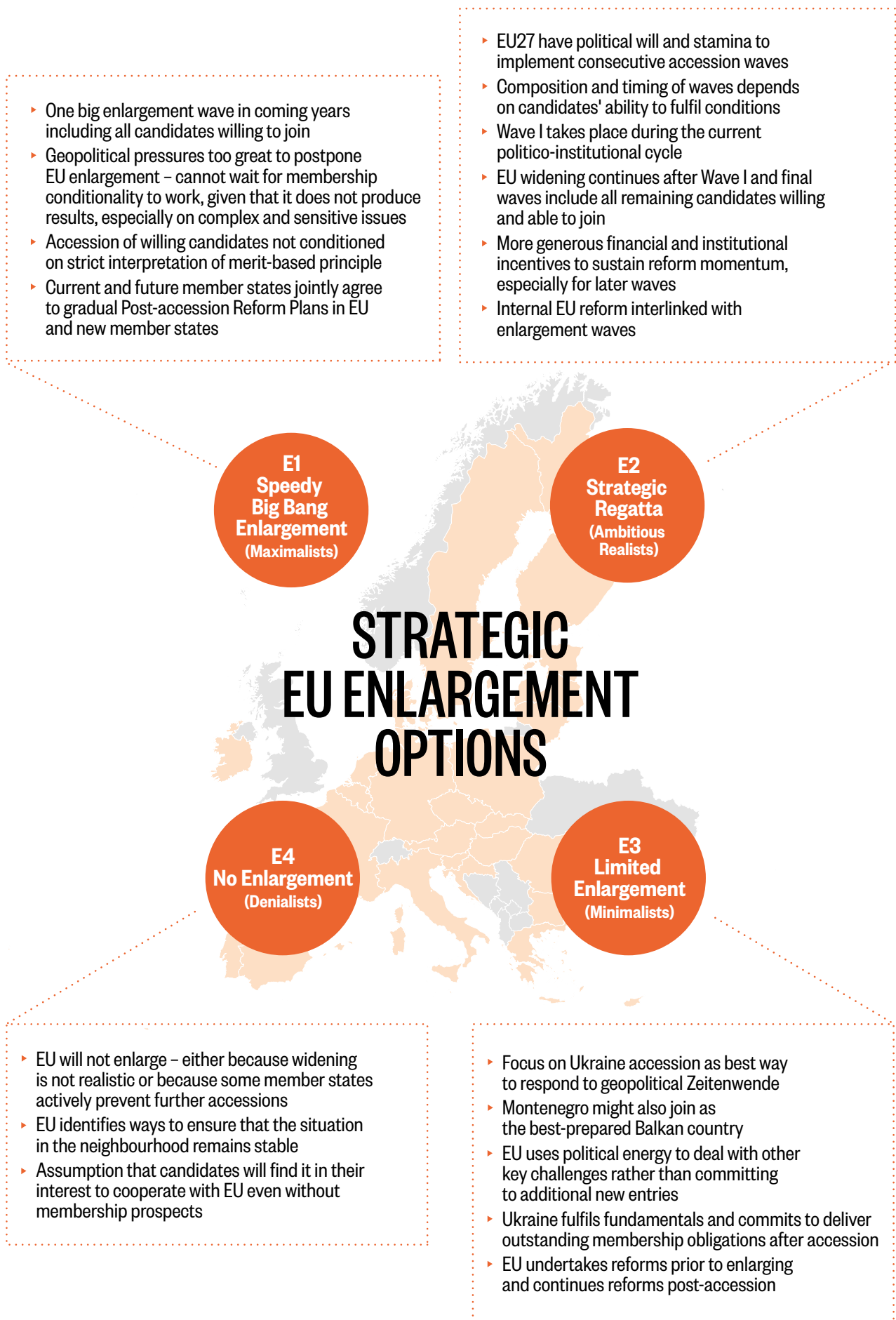
Others want to actively prevent new accessions. They argue that the experience of the big bang enlargement in 2004/2007 has shown that the Union cannot effectively absorb countries without (further) undermining the EU's ability to act. Those who adhere to this logic believe that the entry of new members would be the wrong answer to the geopolitical imperative, as it would overwhelm the Union from a political, economic, financial, and security perspective.

Regardless of whether or not they support some form of EU enlargement, **most Denialists hold that the Union**

should identify ways to ensure that the situation in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood remains as stable as possible, given that this is in the interest of the EU27. However, this should not happen at the expense of the Union's own prosperity and security. In other words, proponents of this option believe that member states should always prioritise their own future and concentrate on the manifold consequences of the poly-transition and permacrisis, which their citizens are confronted with, rather than on the interests of those on the outside who want to join the 'club'.

Most Denialists assume that with or without enlargement, aspiring member states will always choose to cooperate with the EU in order to continue extracting political, economic and/or security benefits. Hence, the advocates of this option are not concerned about malign foreign influence in these countries. They are not convinced that the EU membership perspective is the only anchor for stability and security in Europe. Instead, they understand the new era as a space of multiple weak ties between countries, in which the EU should seek to develop more *ad hoc* and transactional relationships with its neighbours, short of membership.

Most Denialists assume that with or without enlargement, currently aspiring member states will always choose to cooperate with the EU.



2.2 FIVE STRATEGIC EU REFORM OPTIONS – BASIC NARRATIVES AND KEY CHARACTERISTICS

Over the past decades, **EU integration witnessed a remarkable progression**, driven by multiple rounds of enlargement and major treaty revisions from the Maastricht to the Lisbon Treaties, as well as many incremental changes to the Union's governance structures, major policy reforms and unprecedented reactions to the numerous crises since 2007/2008. **Yet, in an enlarged and more heterogeneous Union, significant proactive policy innovations and structural governance reforms have become increasingly difficult.**

The need for all countries to unanimously agree on and then ratify the entry into force of new EU treaties, which in some cases even entail national referenda,²⁵ or the consensus among member states required to improve EU governance via the application of provisions and instruments already included in the Lisbon Treaties, have made member states progressively more indisposed to and/or incapable of adapting the Union's operating system. Especially after the experience of the French 'non' and Dutch 'nee' to the Constitutional Treaty in 2004, preoccupation with consecutive fundamental crises, as well as growing competition from sovereigntist, nationalist and populist forces in the domestic political arena of many EU countries, have cast **doubts on the ability and readiness of the EU27 to adapt the Union to the needs of a rapidly changing environment.**

In an enlarged and more heterogeneous Union, significant proactive policy innovations and structural governance reforms have become increasingly difficult.

Paradoxically, the reform imperative has only become more salient since 2007/2008 in the 'age of permacrisis'.²⁶ In recent years, the EU27 were forced to respond to mounting (geo-)political, (geo-)economic and democratic challenges and crises, including the reaction to the economic consequences of the COVID-19 crisis (via the Recovery and Resilience Fund and NextGenerationEU), the twin green and digital transitions (via the European Green Deal) or the volatility of geo-economic relations between major powers (via the introduction of new trade instruments and the development of a European industrial policy). The response of the EU27 to the "watershed moment"²⁷ triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine was particularly groundbreaking. Steps such as granting the EU membership perspective to the Eastern trio, providing unprecedented humanitarian, financial and military support to Kyiv, and setting up the European Peace Facility (EPF) would have been unthinkable only a few years ago.

But the temptation to regard these reactions to crises as a feasible and sustainable strategy to forge ahead with European integration ignores the magnitude of

current and future inter-related and systemic challenges confronting the EU and its members. **To move forward, the EU27 need to avoid falling into the trap of a "European Progress Illusion"**²⁸, i.e. the mistaken belief that the incremental policy progress made in addressing fundamental crises is sufficient to address the scale, scope and gravity of the European and global *Zeitenwende* unfolding.

Many EU leaders seem less willing than previously to invest political capital into substantially strengthening and deepening European integration and cooperation.

The world is sure to continue witnessing a plethora of fundamental crises, which are all taking place within the context of global instability, fragmentation and polarisation, with war signalling a return to 'my country first' logic in many parts of the world. The list of interrelated challenges is ever expanding, accompanied by fundamental transformations of Europe's societies, driven by climate change and the loss of biodiversity, demography and ageing, and global technological revolutions. Europe's economic competitiveness is also under increasing pressure, while perceived and real inequalities, as well as a lack of agency are having political consequences in key elections in Europe and around the world. The EU and the West in general suffer from increasing social and political fragmentation and polarisation threatening their pluralist, liberal democracies.

In sum, the world has entered the 'age of permapolycrisis' characterised by the permanence of numerous interrelated and at times parallel fundamental crises and transformations, which have led to **severe blockages when it comes to jointly resolving common global challenges.**²⁹ So, how can the Union and liberal pluralist democracies prove that they can work together in this environment, not only in good times but also in difficult circumstances?

As 'strategic masters' and 'masters of the treaties', member states preserve a great deal of control over the pace and scope of reforms at the European level. Yet, in the recent past, **the strategic willingness to pool sovereignty at the EU level and abide by common decisions has come under great pressure.**³⁰ On the side of national governments, many EU leaders seem less willing than previously to invest political capital into substantially strengthening and deepening European integration and cooperation, especially with respect to potential EU governance reform. In this context, the European Council and the Council are currently the most ambivalent and hesitant institutions when it comes to structurally upgrading the Union's operating system. Despite specific initiatives of key EU countries, such as via the Franco-German group of experts³¹, **the appetite among member states to discuss and embark on adapting the Union to 21st century realities is limited at best.**

Traditionally, **the European Parliament (EP) has been the EU institution most open to embracing major (governance) reforms.** Responding to the results of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE), the EP called for rather ambitious changes to the Union’s policies and the functioning of the EU’s governance system. In the aftermath to the Conference, the Parliament reiterated its plea for a fundamental amendment of the EU Treaties in November 2023 by calling on the European Council to convene a Convention as soon as possible in accordance with the ordinary revisions procedure provided for in Article 48(2-5) TEU.³² Yet, decisions on the deepening of European integration remain the member states’ prerogative and, following the 2024 European elections, the new Parliament is also more fragmented and polarised than in the past.³³ Consequently, the current EP still needs to prove that it will be politically able and willing to assertively and effectively throw its collective weight behind the reforms it has asked for in the past.³⁴

For its part, **the von der Leyen European Commission has followed a cautious governance reform approach,** showing more hesitation than the previous Juncker Commission to push for a substantial adaptation of the EU’s operating system.³⁵ When presenting the political priorities of the second von der Leyen Commission in the

EP in November 2024, the Commission President signalled openness to treaty change “where it can improve our Union”.³⁶ However, her priorities focus on policy reforms rather than on the need to upgrade the EU governance system, let alone the need to adapt the EU Treaties.³⁷

The von der Leyen European Commission has followed a cautious governance reform approach.

Given the overall situation, **which path could the EU27 follow when reforming the Union in the coming years?** Keeping in mind the diversity of national and European preferences and positions regarding the future of Europe, **this paper identifies five potential strategic EU reform options and their associated group of supporters: (1) Fundamental Reform Now (Maximalists); (2) Gradual Progressive Reform (Ambitious Realists); (3) Lisbon Plus (Cautious Realists); (4) Status Quo (Minimalists); and (5) Europe of Fatherlands (Re-nationalists).**

Figure 7



2.2.1 Strategic EU reform option 1 (R1): Fundamental Reform Now – Maximalists



- Major deepening of European integration in coming years
- Fundamental reforms include: (1) core policy revisions; (2) in-depth governance reform; and (3) new financial governance
- Substantial amendment of current Lisbon Treaties (LT) requires European Convention with broad mandate
- Fundamental reform starts as early as possible
- Representatives from aspiring member states actively involved in EU reform process ('thinking enlarged')

This strategic EU reform option foresees a **significant deepening of European integration in the coming years, encompassing a substantial strengthening of the EU's supranational governance structures via a European Convention, a shift of competences to the EU level, a radical reform of the Union's core policy areas, as well as a substantial increase of the common financial resources available at the European level.**

This option builds on the assumption that whether or not the EU is enlarged, the Union's current operating system is inadequately equipped to deal with the multiple external and internal challenges it faces. Consequently, according to this logic, the EU needs to take a **major qualitative leap to significantly deepen the level of integration and cooperation** among member states in the immediate future.

In line with the logic of this reform option, **preparing the Union for enlargement is one but not the exclusive reason to reform the EU.** The new (geo-)political and (geo-)economic environment, including the multiple challenges related to the war in Ukraine, the need to enhance Europe's economic competitiveness, democratic backsliding in Europe and beyond, as well as the manifold consequences of the poly-transition (green, technological and demographic), call for a radical overhaul of the EU's policies, governance system and financial instruments.³⁸

The EU needs to take a major qualitative leap to significantly deepen the level of integration and cooperation.

Policy revisions under this maximalist reform option must ensure that the EU's *acquis* will enable an enlarging Union to deal with the severe policy challenges confronting current and future members. This includes reforms aiming to enhance economic competitiveness, strengthen Europe's security and defence, or modernise the Union's Cohesion Policy and Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), where the accession of a large number of new countries could lead to "undue shocks and major disruptions."³⁹ In addition, EU policies

on energy and environment, migration and asylum, fundamental rights, and taxation will also require in-depth adjustments in the coming years.

Policy revisions under this maximalist reform option must ensure that the EU's *acquis* will enable an enlarging Union to deal with the severe policy challenges confronting current and future members.

Fundamental governance reforms proposed under this option **include changes to the EU's decision-making system and its overall institutional functioning.** Advocates of this reform option argue that this is necessary to make sure that the Union's complex multilevel governance system becomes more effective and operable also in the context of a potentially larger EU. Substantial treaty reforms based on the ordinary revision procedure, including a European Convention, could be implemented to this end. This could include extending the ordinary legislative procedure based on qualified majority voting (QMV) in the Council and co-decision with the EP to make it possible to trigger the general *passerelle* clause (bridge clause) by a super-qualified majority instead of the current requirement for unanimity in the Council. Other potential reforms would be converting to (super-qualified) QMV in the Council in the field of foreign policy, security and defence; amending Article 7 TEU to strengthen existing EU tools and processes ensuring respect and protection of the rule of law and fundamental values across the EU; or making it easier to amend the EU Treaties in future (for more details, see also EU reform recommendation #3).⁴⁰

To provide the enlarging Union with the adequate means to deliver on the manifold challenges and to effectively implement major policy objectives, the **Maximalists also insist on reforms related to the EU's financial governance structures**, such as granting the European Parliament full powers of co-decision with the Council regarding the Union's revenue, or including additional

own resources in the EU budget to pay for European public goods, in addition to national budget contributions. These reforms should also be accompanied by a **substantial increase of the overall common financial means available at the European level in the context of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) or beyond**, including instruments of joint borrowing.

The proponents of this strategic option argue that given their scope and complexity, internal EU reforms will need an **in-depth amendment of the current Treaties** in line with the ordinary revision procedure (Article 48(2-5) TEU). This will require a **Convention with a broad mandate** involving national and European parliamentarians, as well as representatives of the

Heads of State or Government and the Commission. The Convention would be followed by a subsequent Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) with the purpose of determining the necessary treaty amendments. The new Treaty would then have to be ratified by all member states (see also EU reform recommendation #3).

Considering the urgency of external and internal challenges, proponents of this option – particularly in the European Parliament⁴¹ – argue that this **fundamental reform process would have to start as early as possible** in the 2024-2029 politico-institutional cycle. According to the notion of **“thinking enlarged”**,⁴² policymakers, citizens, civil society, and experts from (potential) future EU countries should also be involved in this process.

2.2.2 Strategic EU reform option 2 (R2): Gradual Progressive EU Reform – Ambitious Realists



- ▶ Ambitious and realistic reform of EU policies, financing and governance
- ▶ Uncertainties surrounding enlargement require gradual EU reform
- ▶ Reform process open to all potential reform avenues
- ▶ EU not able to avoid Convention – but treaty amendment carefully prepared
- ▶ Member states (MS) willing to deepen cooperation able do so outside EU framework

This strategic EU reform option assumes that the manifold internal and external challenges confronting the Union, including a potential enlargement to 30+ members, require an **ambitious but also realistic reform of the EU’s key policies and governance structures**, given that the Union’s current operating system must be adapted to the needs of the new era. Yet, member states’ current hesitation or outright opposition to an extensive overhaul of the EU’s governance structures suggest that **potential efforts aimed at reforming the Union’s operating system should be handled carefully and gradually**. Conversely, the proponents of this option fear that a rushed and ambitious reform process could backfire if it leads to unsurmountable divisions among the EU27.

Advocates of this strategic option argue that **the upcoming EU reform process might require more than one attempt to structurally reform the Union**. As after 1989/90, when the EU went through numerous treaty revision rounds (i.e. from Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice to the Constitutional Treaty and then the Treaty of Lisbon), shaping the Union of tomorrow might also entail repeated efforts.

According to Ambitious Realists, a **Gradual Progressive EU Reform process would be justified in light of the uncertainties surrounding enlargement**, especially the lack of clarity about the precise number of (potential) new members able and willing to join the EU in the foreseeable future. Independently of whether or how the Union will widen, champions of a Gradual Progressive EU Reform

argue that the process should be incremental rather than involving one major integration leap, as Maximalists propose (see Strategic EU reform option 1 (R1)). From this perspective, **reforms that are most feasible and necessary** to prepare the Union for enlargement by increasing the EU’s capacity to decide and act **should be prioritised**.

In more concrete terms, **EU policy reforms should be carried out progressively** with a view to strengthening the Union’s defence capabilities, enhancing Europe’s economic competitiveness, improving the Union’s cohesion policy, modernising the EU’s CAP, or implementing the Green (Industrial) Plan and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum over time. In addition, the Union should gradually increase the overall financial volume of the next MFF and, if necessary, add alternative forms of EU financing (including joint borrowing) to secure the enlarging Union’s ability to effectively implement its collectively defined policy objectives.

Regarding a reform of the EU’s governance system, this strategic option foresees a **gradual reform process that is open to all potential reform avenues**. These range from technical governance adaptations to a full exploitation of the possibilities provided by the Lisbon Treaties, targeted surgical treaty amendments, institutional adaptations via EU accession treaties, and fundamental reforms of the EU Treaties by a European Convention (see EU reform recommendation #3). The

latter builds on the assumption that while essential policy reforms and targeted governance adaptations could help to realise some of the necessary innovations, the potential need for a more substantial reform of the Union’s current primary law cannot be ruled out. Ambitious Realists argue that the **EU27 will not be able to eternally avoid another European Convention**, if the Union wants to pursue a more fundamental governance reform, including some of the innovations advocated by the Maximalists (see strategic EU reform option 1 (R1)).

To prepare this process, Ambitious Realists insist that an **amendment of the Union’s primary law would have to be carefully prepared** to ensure that: **(1) all relevant parties agree on the end goal**; **(2) there is strong buy-in of member states** for any potential EU reform (including a possible amendment of the EU Treaties), given that all EU countries will have to unanimously agree to and ratify the new treaty; and **(3) citizens from**

current and future member states are involved in the reform process to generate broad public support.

The EU27 will not be able to eternally avoid another European Convention.

Some proponents of this strategic EU reform option argue that in case an agreement to substantially deepen the level of integration is blocked within the existing EU framework, alternative routes need to be explored. More specifically, **EU countries that are ready to deepen their level of cooperation might also have to extend their cooperation beyond the legal confines of the current Treaties** (see EU reform recommendation #4).

2.2.3 Strategic EU reform option 3 (R3): Lisbon Plus – Cautious Realists



- ▶ Lisbon Treaties can accommodate both EU reform and absorption of new MS
- ▶ EU is enlargement- and crisis-proof if MS use reform possibilities included in LT
- ▶ 'Willing and able' member states can deepen cooperation within EU framework
- ▶ Attempt to fundamentally reform EU is unsurmountable hurdle
- ▶ EU focuses on delivering key political priorities

This strategic reform option assumes that the **Lisbon Treaties can accommodate both necessary EU internal reforms and the absorption of potential new members**. Proponents of this option argue that the **current EU Treaties are enlargement- and crisis-proof, provided that member states are ready to use the existing provisions and instruments to update the Union’s operating system**. According to them, the experience of the different chapters of the permacrisis, as well as the accession of Croatia in 2013, have shown that the Union is able to advance European cooperation, come up with unprecedented and effective responses to crises, and enlarge within the EU’s existing legal remit. The only prerequisite is that member states muster the political will to do so.

From this perspective, **Cautious Realists see no need to substantially amend the Union’s primary law** to ensure an adequate functioning of an enlarged Union, **especially when the success of any major attempt to reform the EU and its Treaties is by no means guaranteed**. Champions of this approach insist that there is a need to be realistic and accept that member states –

their governments, parliaments, citizens, and even some constitutional courts – are not willing and/or able to substantially deepen the level of EU integration, at least not at this point in time.

Cautious Realists see no need to substantially amend the Union’s primary law to ensure an adequate functioning of an enlarged Union.

In addition, advocates of this option argue that a plethora of (likely) **necessary governance reforms, as well as a potential deepening of integration among ‘willing and able’ countries, are possible on the basis of the current EU Treaties**. An extension of qualified majority voting in the Council could be achieved via the general and specific *passerelle* clauses (see EU reform recommendation #3); a reduction in the size of the Commission is already foreseen

in the Lisbon Treaties; an adjustment of the number of seats in the EP does not require an amendment of the Lisbon Treaties; and EU countries that wish to intensify their level of cooperation can use the instruments of differentiated integration already included in the EU Treaties (enhanced cooperation; permanent structured cooperation (PESCO)). Cautious Realists argue that all these **reforms are either possible within the Union’s current legal framework and/or could be implemented in the context of the accession treaties** accompanying future enlargements (see also EU reform recommendation #3).

They also hold that an immediate or gradual **attempt to fundamentally change the Union’s existing operating system**, like the Maximalists and Ambitious Realists advocate, would be far too risky and could backfire, especially since the result of a Convention and

subsequent IGC would have to be ratified by all member states. According to them, this requirement **is an almost insurmountable hurdle**. Consequently, they advise that the Union should continue to operate on the basis of the Lisbon Treaties.

Cautious Realists believe that the **Union should focus on delivering its key political priorities**, such as those outlined in the European Council’s 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda or the political priorities defined by the second von der Leyen Commission. They also acknowledge the need for the EU to be able to finance the Union’s policy objectives, but **reject the prospect of a major overhaul of the Union’s financial governance structures and instruments, or a substantial increase of the EU’s financing capacity** in the context of the next MFF or beyond.

2.2.4 Strategic EU reform option 4 (R4): *Status Quo* – Minimalists



- ▶ EU able to operate on basis of existing institutional set-up
- ▶ No need to change EU's operating system or core policies
- ▶ Attempts to transfer further powers would aggravate divisions among EU27
- ▶ EU is pragmatic and concentrates on policy delivery
- ▶ Attempts to deepen integration can undermine EU widening
- ▶ EU27 will progress in context of future crises

This strategic reform option builds on the assumption that the **Union can continue to operate on the basis of its existing institutional set-up** and in line with its current main policy directions. Thus, Minimalists argue that there is **no need to change the Union’s operating system or its core policies**, especially since member states are neither willing nor in agreement about how and which areas need reform. According to this *status quo* reform option, the EU and its members proved during the different chapters of the permacrisis that the **Union can successfully weather serious ‘storms’ with the EU’s existing operating system**. Furthermore, the EU is seen as on course to sufficiently manage the poly-transition (green, technological and demographic), given the level of ambition defined by the European Council in its 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda and the political priorities of the second von der Leyen European Commission.⁴⁵

Proponents of this option, particularly in the (European) Council, hold that the Union should not aim to deepen the level of integration or the degree of cooperation among its members. Instead, for them, the ***status quo* is sufficient and any attempts to further transfer powers to Brussels/Strasbourg risks aggravating existing divisions among EU countries**. Moreover, this option assumes that a potential further widening of the Union

would become more difficult if the level of European integration is further deepened, as it would effectively raise the bar for new members to join the ‘club’.

The Union can successfully weather serious ‘storms’ with the EU’s existing operating system.

Thus, rather than aiming to (substantially) reform the Union’s governance structures or to (fundamentally) increase the EU budget (as suggested in strategic EU reform options 1-3), the Minimalists advise the **EU and its institutions to be pragmatic and concentrate on the delivery of specific policy reforms** that do not further undermine the sovereignty of member states. Such **policy revisions may include selected and limited incremental reforms** aiming to strengthen the Union’s defence capabilities, boost Europe’s competitiveness, maintain a level playing field in the Single Market, improve

the Union's migration and asylum policies, or ensure the continuous functioning of the CAP and cohesion policy. Finally, **most Minimalists also argue that**

the EU will be compelled to continue to develop in reaction to fundamental crises by introducing innovations that previously seemed impossible.

2.2.5 Strategic EU reform option 5 (R5): Europe of Fatherlands – Re-nationalists



- ▶ EU stops pushing towards illusory 'United States of Europe'
- ▶ EU reverses past integration mistakes (including euro, Schengen) and re-nationalises competences
- ▶ Re-nationalisation offers more pragmatic approach to European integration
- ▶ Going back to basics makes EU enlargement easier

Contrary to the previous four EU reform paths, this strategic option draws on the assumption that the **Union needs to change but not towards a federalist construct. Instead, adaptations at the EU level should be used to re-nationalise competences** wherever possible.⁴⁴ The nationalist and Eurosceptic supporters of this option argue that the Union and its members should admit that European integration has gone too far. According to them, the experience of the past decades and the EU's inability to effectively deal with the different phases of the permacrisis since 2007/2008, especially the Union's failure to avert the migration crisis of 2015/2016, show that the **EU has become part of the problem rather than part of the solution.**

Champions of this reform option hold that **instead of pushing towards an illusory 'United States of Europe', the Union of the future should follow the notion of a 'Europe of Fatherlands'** rooted in national sovereignty.⁴⁵ To this end, European integration should perform a radical U-turn and undo past mistakes by abandoning the common currency, dismantling the Schengen area, and reducing to a minimum the role of the European Commission and the European Parliament. To achieve this objective, **most EU-critical forces would aim to hollow out the Union from within rather than trying to exit the European construct.**

Many of those supporting this option hope that the re-election of Donald Trump, who rejects multilateralism and despises the EU,⁴⁶ can help them to move European integration in a national direction. They believe that

Trump 2.0 will seek to increase fragmentation and polarisation in Europe and beyond, which in turn will increase the chances of EU-critical forces playing an even stronger role at the national level, especially when it comes to European issues. **Some even trust – or hope – that Trump will help European illiberal and nativist forces to limit the powers of the EU and thus strengthen the position of the nation-state.**⁴⁷

According to the advocates of this option, **a re-nationalisation of Europe should herald the start of a more pragmatic and effective approach to European integration.** For them, member states should focus actions in the EU on a limited number of policy areas and re-patriate key European competences. In other words, member states should carry out a fundamental review of the Union's powers and competences in order to identify where cooperation at the EU level provides real added value and where it does not.

Re-nationalists claim that the majority of European citizens are neither in favour of a further loss of national sovereignty nor ready for a substantial deepening of European integration. They hold that public acceptance of the EU will increase if the Union concentrates on its core business, i.e. the Single Market, whose benefits are widely acknowledged. The proponents of this option argue that **going back to basics will make enlargement** towards the Balkans and Eastern Europe easier for the Union, given that it will lower the hurdles and de-complicate the accession process for new EU members.



3. Where to for EU enlargement and EU reform?

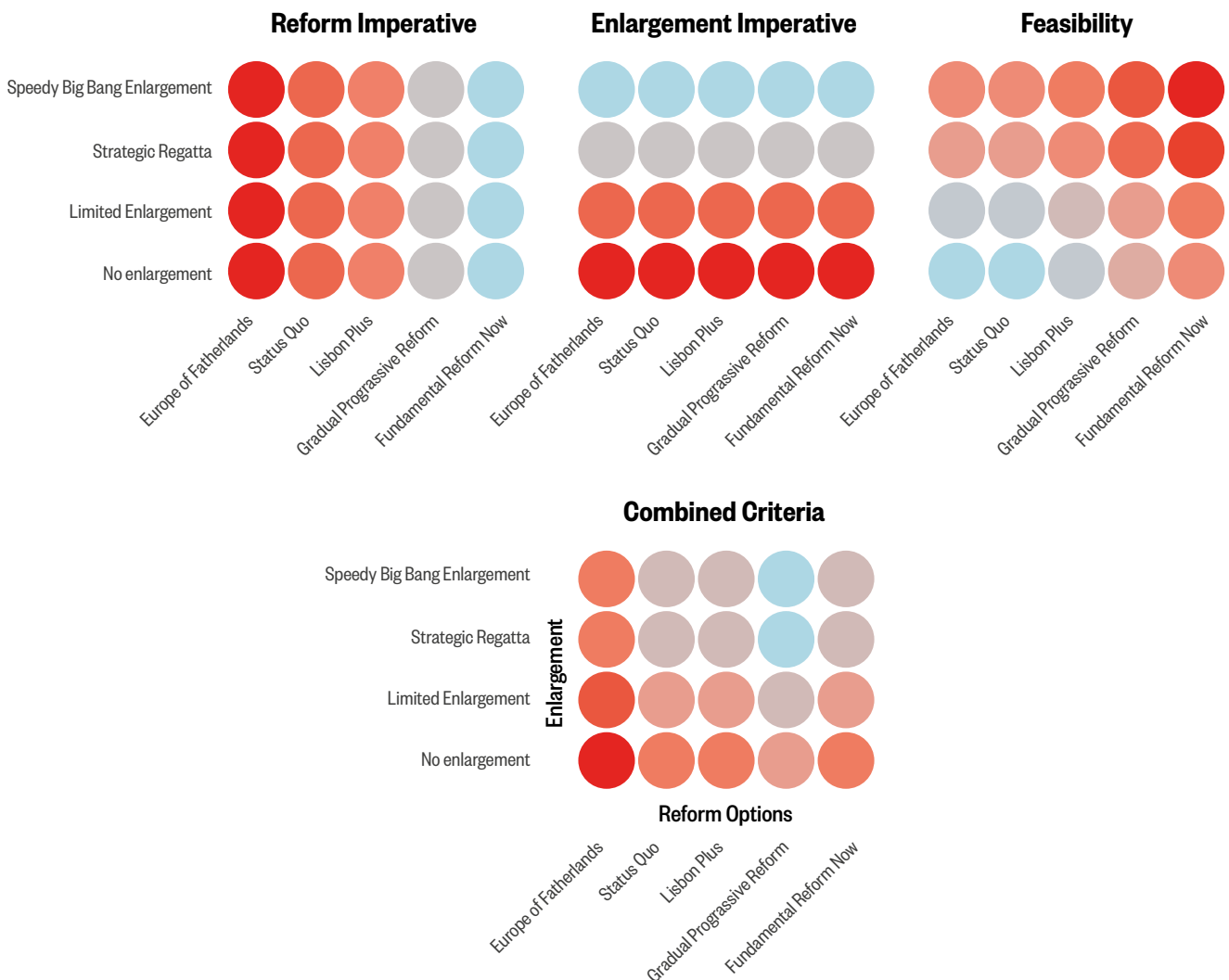
This paper has identified four potential strategic options for the future of enlargement and five potential avenues for internal EU reform (see Part 2). But which of these options will serve Europe’s strategic interest in the current geopolitical environment and the long run? And *vice versa*, which potential avenues will not help the Union effectively respond to the enlargement and reform imperatives described in the beginning of this paper? Where should the choice of decision-makers fall on the spectrum between a *desirable* way forward, at one end, and a *feasible* pathway, at the other?

For reasons described below, six potential EU enlargement and EU reform options are neither compatible with the two basic normative assumptions defined at the start of the paper, nor feasible in the existing political context (see Part 3.1). These no-go options include: Limited Enlargement (E3), No Enlargement (E4), Europe of Fatherlands (R5), *Status Quo* (R4), Lisbon Plus (R3) and Fundamental Reform Now (R1).

With these strategic options ruled out, Part 3.2 presents one strategic EU reform option – Gradual Progressive EU Reform (R2) – and two possible strategic EU Enlargement avenues – Speedy Big Bang (E1) and Strategic Regatta (E2) – as preferred ways forward.

Figure 9

STRATEGIC OPTIONS’ CRITERIA SATISFACTION



3.1 LEADING NOWHERE: INSUFFICIENT AND UNREALISTIC OPTIONS

3.1.1 Limited Enlargement option (E3) – band-aid fix

Advocates of the Limited Enlargement option hold that the (accelerated) accession of Ukraine and (possibly) Montenegro would be the best way for the EU to respond to the fundamental threat that Russia poses to Europe's security. **There are many valid reasons why Ukraine and Montenegro should join the Union in the foreseeable future** (see EU enlargement recommendations #3 and 4), and why the EU should enhance its political, economic, financial, military, and humanitarian support for Kyiv, especially in light of recent geopolitical developments following Trump's re-election.

However, **the entry of Ukraine and Montenegro into the EU would not suffice to make the Union and its vicinity stronger and safer.** If enlargement is understood as a geopolitical tool, accepting only two aspiring member states would fail to extend the Union's sphere of influence to other key allies and important parts of the EU's neighbourhood. This strategy would create a zone on the South-Eastern border of the Union that would be fertile ground for conflict and crises, as well as vulnerable to the influence of external actors – above all, Russia.

While the EU could decide to continue investing in economic and diplomatic ties with the other candidates that do not make it into the 'club', it is unlikely that such engagement would be enough to keep these countries within the Union's orbit. This risk largely emerges because the former EU-hopeful countries would likely interpret the Union's decision to withdraw their European membership perspective as a breach of trust. The Western Balkan countries, in particular, had been told for two decades that they had a future in the Union. **Betraying the enlargement promise would make the EU an unreliable partner and therefore could motivate disappointed candidates to seek alternative alliances** based on interest and without reform strings attached.

Betraying the enlargement promise would make the EU an unreliable partner and therefore could motivate disappointed candidates to seek alternative alliances.

Moreover, the possibility that the EU will foster vulnerability on its doorsteps if it closes its doors to all other aspiring member states after Ukraine and Montenegro is substantiated by the likely **evaporation of the Union's transformative leverage** in the Limited Enlargement option. Outside a formal accession process or a post-accession plan for reforms, these countries would likely have little – if any – incentives to consolidate their democratic and economic records or resolve their bilateral

disputes. Having economically weak neighbours with shady democratic credentials and many 'bones' to pick with each other would offer little comfort to an EU seeking peace, democracy and security on the continent. Enemies of the Union, like Putin's Russia, would be sure to want to exploit such a situation to try to further destabilise the EU's vicinity.

Limiting enlargement to one or two countries would also shatter the Union's standing and ambitions as a global player. If the EU is not able to deliver enlargement after 20 years of massive investments in the dossier and a long-standing, flamboyant rhetorical commitment to the process, it will be difficult for other world powers to take the Union serious on the international stage. Apart from Ukraine, the other candidates in the Western Balkans but also the East are small, economically and size-wise. If the EU cannot manage such countries, questions about how it will be able to lead and handle bigger political actors in the world become legitimate and grow in relevance. This option thus casts doubt on the Union's ability to achieve strategic autonomy and implement a liberal order on the continent and beyond.

3.1.2 No Enlargement option (E4) – self-defeating

The proponents of the No Enlargement option hold that the Union will not or should not extend beyond its current borders given that – from their perspective – doing so would overwhelm the current EU and its member states (see strategic EU enlargement option #4). **If the EU27 were to follow this logic, the Union would miss out on the opportunity to grow in numbers and reach political maturity.** In an increasingly hostile regional and global environment, an EU which refuses to come of age jeopardises not just its own *raison d'être* as a transnational peace project but its very existence.

Enlargement is not a philanthropic cause or recreational activity for the EU, which the Union pursues because it can or because it is easy. It is a strategy that perpetuates the rationale of the EU's existence, i.e. achieving peace, security, prosperity, and liberal democracy through supranational cooperation at the European level. Progressive rounds of enlargement have not only expanded the area of stability, democracy and affluence on the continent. They have validated the Union's purpose and contributed to its preservation and evolution. EU widening pushed the Union out of its comfort zone and led to further deepening of European integration with every wave. **An ever larger and more integrated EU helped the Union grow into a force to be reckoned with.**

But with great power comes great responsibility. Part of that responsibility is to make good on one's promises – like the membership offer to the Western Balkans and the Eastern trio – and to defend your current and future members when peace and prosperity are threatened. **Barring the gates of the EU fortress and leaving countries outside to their own fate goes against the Union's purpose and undermines its strength.**

A closed and inward-looking EU is a weaker Union, with fewer incentives also to reform itself in order to become more agile in the face of ongoing and future crises. If the EU decides not to enlarge, reform is only likely to mean a re-nationalisation of (at least) some of the Union's competences, which would effectively work to undo European cooperation. Alternatively, it could mean delivering on reforms when they are seen to serve specific countries' national interest – as opposed to the good of the EU as a whole. **A Union that does not work on its own self-development and improvement cannot survive in the long term.**

For the aspiring member states and the rest of the world, the consequences of no enlargement will be similar to the implications of the limited enlargement option. **Withdrawing the membership prospect would also hurt the credibility, leverage and image of the EU abroad.** Hard feelings will probably strain relations between the Union and its vicinity in the Balkans and to the East. The EU's ability to promote reforms in these countries will also wane. And although incentives can be linked to continued reform requests, the experience with the Neighbourhood Policy suggests that **EU demands have little effect without the membership reward.**

Barring the gates of the EU fortress and leaving countries outside to their own fate goes against the Union's purpose and undermines its strength.

Given the already high level of integration between the Union and many of the enlargement countries, the question that emerges in this option is about the kind of relation that the EU can/should establish if enlargement is no longer on the cards. **Most candidates will probably not welcome alternative forms of engagement that stop short of full EU membership.** But it also seems difficult to unravel deep-rooted integration in many policy areas between the Union and the current candidates (a 'Brexit *déjà vu*' of sorts?).

Without the motivation and help to reform, candidates would likely become rather different neighbours – less predictable, safe and developed – than what the Union and its members might want or hope for. This outcome would undermine the massive investment that the EU has poured into these countries for years. **The long-term consequences of this option for both the Union and its neighbours in strategic and security terms would thus be disastrous.** It would lead down a treacherous path. Choosing this option would indicate that member states have probably given up on European integration in any case, likely for the sake of bolstering their national sovereignty.

3.1.3 Europe of Fatherlands option (R5) – historic mistake

The advocates of this option hold that the EU should perform a radical U-turn by abandoning the common currency, dismantling the Schengen area, and fundamentally reducing the role of the Union's supranational institutions (see also strategic EU reform option #5). But **if member states follow this radical path, advocated by a good number of anti-EU forces, the enlarging Union would not be able to collectively respond to the manifold challenges which Europe is and will continue to be confronted with in future.**

In a world increasingly dominated by the logic of power and 'my-country-first' attitude, even the biggest EU countries would be internationally marginalised if they were no longer able to benefit from the Union's collective economic and political weight. **Hollowing out the EU from within would undermine the Union's political and operational effectiveness.** As a result, current and future generations would be prevented from defending the EU's interests and values both in its direct neighbourhood and globally.

In the new era, **member states cannot afford to step back and lose their combined strength.** Re-nationalising the Union's competences as much as possible and concentrating merely on the core benefits of the Single Market would not solve Europe's problems, as the supporters of the EU of Fatherlands option argue. On the contrary, it would **undermine the historic achievements of the European integration project and lead to a dangerous re-emergence of nationalism on the continent.**

By going back to basics and abandoning the path towards an "ever closer Union" (Article 1 TEU) to reclaim national sovereignty, **the integration process would reverse the direction it had taken since the Second World War, without a clear guarantee of where this reversal might lead.** It would also go against the will of a clear majority of European citizens, who not only cherish the benefits of the European project but actually want the Union to improve its ability to promote Europe's security and prosperity.⁴⁸

In the new era, member states cannot afford to step back and lose their combined strength.

One could argue that a re-nationalisation of EU competences would make it easier for aspiring member states to join the Union, given that it would lower the integration hurdles and thus de-complicate the accession process for prospective entrants. However, **it would not be in the interest of future EU countries if tomorrow's Union**

were no longer able to provide the benefits of the euro and Schengen, or if they joined a ‘club’ whose level of ambition has been reduced to a minimum. Therefore, the strategic option of a Europe of Fatherlands would not ‘only’ fail the reform imperative but also undermine the aspiration of future EU members to join a strong Union that helps them to increase their level of security, sustainability and prosperity.

3.1.4 *Status Quo* option (R4) – risky complacency

The Union’s current *status quo* is not crisis-proof. The inability of the EU27 to proactively avert or at least prepare for previous phases of the permacrisis, which Europeans are experiencing since 2007/2008, shows that the Union should not continue on the basis of its existing operating system. Although the EU and its members have in the past been able to collectively do what was required to avoid crises from spiralling out of control, **it would be naive and dangerous to believe that this ‘crisis automatism’ will always work in future.**

The Union’s current governance structures are not flexible and strong enough to deal with future existential (geo-)political, (geo-)economic and democratic challenges.

Those who argue that the EU and its institutions should be ‘pragmatic’ and concentrate on the realistic delivery of specific policy objectives ignore that **the Union’s current governance structures are not flexible and strong enough to deal with future existential (geo-)political, (geo-)economic and democratic challenges.** The EU27 will fail to reach a higher level of ambition, which is required in today’s highly volatile and uncertain environment, if each and every member state can block key decisions in the (European) Council, if core policies are not constantly adapted, or if the Union’s ability to finance the implementation of policy priorities via the MFF or alternative financing instruments remain at current levels.

As in the past, **a potential enlargement of the Union to 30+ members would compound the EU’s inability to sufficiently progress towards an “ever closer Union”, if the EU and its members are unable and unwilling to progressively adapt the Union’s institutional framework.** The advocates of the current institutional set-up ignore the historical fact that previous rounds of EU enlargement were always accompanied by a reform of the European integration project.

3.1.5 Lisbon Plus option (R3) – insufficient muddling

The proponents of the Lisbon Plus reform option hold that the current EU Treaties are both crisis- and enlargement-proof. Judging from the current political mood and level of ambition in the EU27 regarding the overall future of European integration, this strategic option seems to be the most realistic reform path in the coming years. However, even if one assumes that the Lisbon Treaties would suffice, **it is doubtful that member states will be politically willing to exploit the legal possibilities provided by the current EU Treaties. As a result, Europe will most likely continue to muddle through, whereas the world around requires the Union to radically change.**⁴⁹

The advocates of the Lisbon Plus option argue that a plethora of potential governance innovations and higher levels of differentiated integration among the ‘willing and able’ can be achieved on the basis of provisions and instruments already enshrined in the Union’s primary law. In this context, they explicitly refer to the general and specific *passarelle* clauses, allowing the Union to improve its decision-making procedures without treaty change. They also invoke the possibility of using the differentiation instruments of enhanced cooperation and/or PESCO, which in theory make it possible for a group of member states to deepen their level of cooperation within the EU framework (see also EU reform recommendation #4).

However, **the experience since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaties in 2009 has clearly shown that the EU27 have not been able to agree on whether or how to apply the legal possibilities provided by the EU Treaties to improve the EU’s operating system.** Consequently, an enlarging Union will not be able to develop its existing governance structures, which in turn will continue to structurally limit the Union’s ability to take decisions and actions beyond the lowest common denominator. **In a world characterised by increasing levels of volatility, uncertainty, short-termism, populism and nationalism, this will condemn Europe to gradual decline and irrelevance.**

The experience since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaties in 2009 has clearly shown that the EU27 have not been able to agree on whether or how to apply the legal possibilities provided by the EU Treaties.

3.1.6 Fundamental Reform Now option (R1) – not on the cards

If the Lisbon Plus option is insufficient and the pressures to reform the EU are so high, **a major qualitative leap by the Union to substantially deepen the level of integration and cooperation among its members would seem necessary.** This would have to encompass

a radical overhaul of the Union's governance structures requiring an in-depth amendment of the current EU Treaties in the framework of a European Convention, a comprehensive reform of the Union's core policy areas, and a very substantial increase of federal spending at the European level.

In an ideal world, the EU27 should be ready to promptly reform (and enlarge) the Union as a matter of urgency.

However, **despite many wake-up calls during the last two decades, such a radical reform of the EU has not transpired.** In an ideal world, the EU27 should be ready to promptly reform (and enlarge) the Union as a matter of urgency. However, **the vast majority of member states – including pro- and anti-EU forces – are not ready or willing to follow this logic**, for a number of reasons:⁵⁰

► First, there is **no political readiness to substantially pool more sovereignty at the European level.** EU governments perceive themselves as 'strategic masters' and 'masters of the Treaties' and want to ensure that national capitals will continue to shape the Union's strategic agenda and long-term future. They are keen to avoid a reform of the EU's governance system that could potentially evolve at the expense of the (European) Council's ability to determine EU decisions in line with national preferences and interests.

► Second, **many national parliamentarians are afraid that a strengthening of the EU's supranational institutions**, including an enhancement of the role of the European Parliament, **could undermine their privileged position.** As elected national deputies, they consider themselves to be the representatives of the ultimate sovereign – the national *demos* – and fear that a further pooling of sovereignty at the EU level could undermine their role and potentially even erode the national foundations of European democracies.

► Third, there is **no agreement among member states and between EU institutions on the overall future of the European integration process.** Some voices in the EU, led by Victor Orbán and his ideological allies, would like to abandon the objective of an "ever closer Union" enshrined in the EU Treaties (Article 1 TEU). They want to hollow out the Union from within and ensure that national capitals are able to self-determine their future. Consequently, any attempt to fundamentally reform the EU and its supranational institutional structure might fail or backfire, given the opposition from multiple political actors. This is why many governments, even those that are pro-EU, are unwilling to even attempt to substantially reform the existing EU Treaties via a European Convention: because they fear that EU-critical forces will fundamentally refute such efforts. In turn, this would either precipitate the end of the Convention or prevent a new EU treaty from being ratified.

So, if the Limited Enlargement option would be no more than a band-aid fix and the No Enlargement option self-defeating, which path should the EU widening follow in the coming years? And if the Europe of Fatherlands option would be a historic mistake, the *Status Quo* option the sign of risky complacency, the Lisbon Plus option essentially insufficient muddling, and the Fundamental Reform Now not on the cards, which avenue should a reform of the European Union follow in the coming years?

3.2 THE WAY FORWARD: STRATEGIC PATHS TOWARDS ENLARGEMENT AND REFORM

If the six potential options discussed above are either inadequate or undesirable, then one Strategic EU Reform option – Gradual Progressive EU Reform (R2) – and two possible Strategic EU Enlargement avenues – Speedy Big Bang (E1) and Strategic Regatta (E2) – remain.

But why should the EU and its members prefer these strategic paths for the future of EU widening and deepening? How can they help EUrope to effectively respond to the enlargement and reform imperatives? And how can these options be combined and implemented in practice?

3.2.1 Gradual Progressive EU Reform option (R2) – pragmatic ambition

An enlarging EU requires a realistic but also ambitious reform of its key policies, financing modalities and governance structures, given that the Union’s current operating system must be adapted to the requirements of the new era. EUrope needs to embrace change if it wants to effectively cope with the new (geo-)political and (geo-)economic environment, the need to strengthen economic competitiveness, democratic backsliding, the consequences of the poly-transition, or future chapters of the permacrisis. But how can internal EU reforms be achieved without a major qualitative integration leap, if the *status quo* is inadequate, and if a radical U-turn would be the wrong path?

A gradual EU reform could make the Union enlargement-, future- and crisis-proof if it enables the Union to follow an ambitious, firm while also predictable process towards fundamental change. Similar to the reforms in the 1990s and 2000s, the gradual approach would divide the overall reform path into several steps, acknowledging that more than one attempt might be required to strengthen and adapt the Union’s operating system. Essential for this approach will be the elaboration of a predictable reform plan, which is more ambitious, detailed and concrete than what is currently on the table.

This plan will have to be dynamic, providing sufficient flexibility to adapt the process over time according to future needs – while assuming from the outset that the EU will eventually include 30+ members. **The Gradual Progressive Reform approach will enable the Union to adapt its operating system, while Europe navigates through a highly volatile and uncertain environment in the coming years.**

Similar to the Strategic Regatta approach to enlargement (see 3.2.2), one can safely assume that the **internal EU reforms will require different reform waves**, including technical and institutional adaptations on the basis of the current EU Treaties but also more fundamental governance adaptations, involving an eventual amendment of the Union’s current primary law.

Even if the exact outcome of internal EU reform cannot be predicted from today’s perspective, **EUrope needs to**

overcome the present stalemate and provide a new impetus if it wants to break the existing deadlock among the EU27. This process should start now and develop over time, given that the Union and its members cannot afford to stall internal reforms any longer – this is why the Gradual Progressive EU Reform option is the most suitable avenue towards a more effective system of EU governance.

Increasing the clarity and predictability of the path towards internal EU reform is required to persuade member states, who are currently very hesitant when it comes to adapting the Union to the new realities, **to commit themselves not ‘only’ to the principle that the Union’s operating system needs strengthening but also to a concrete process** that will move the EU in that direction.

The Gradual Progressive Reform option offers a **compromise between the different reform approaches**: to Maximalists, who want the EU to take a major qualitative integration leap, it offers the perspective of a potential amendment of the current EU Treaties at some point in the future. To Cautious Realists, who want to concentrate on the reform possibilities included in the Lisbon Treaties, it ensures a prudent preparation of a vigilant adaptation of the Union’s operating system. And to those who fear that European integration will fall victim to anti-EU forces seeking to block the Union from within, it opens the possibility for the ‘willing and able’ to advance, even if some EU governments will try to systemically avert an “ever closer Union”.

The Gradual Progressive Reform approach will enable the Union to adapt its operating system, while Europe navigates through a highly volatile and uncertain environment in the coming years.

But the Gradual Progressive EU Reform option does not only provide a middle ground, **it also allows the Union to adapt its reform path according to the needs of an enlarging EU** – independently of whether the Union will widen gradually (Strategic Regatta (E2)) or if all willing candidates will be allowed to join the EU at once in the coming years (Speedy Big Bang (E1)).

3.2.2 Strategic Regatta option (E2) – win-win commitment

By following the Strategic Regatta option, the Union could interlock its merit-based approach to enlargement with the more recent geopolitical urgency to extend the EU’s borders. The incrementalism that characterises this option will reassure those member states who fear that a hasty enlargement would bring into the Union unprepared entrants. In a similar vein, a step-

by-step internal EU reform process will give reluctant or hesitant member states time to accept the need to adapt the Union's operational system to new geopolitical realities.

The fact that in this option the EU would pursue both tracks – i.e. enlargement and internal reform – in tandem can create a virtuous circle in which the two processes will reinforce each other. More specifically, candidates that accede will motivate the EU to reform in order to stay functional. They will also inspire the remaining EU-hopeful countries to meet the conditions set because the policy has regained credibility. At the same time, if the Union takes action to prepare for a larger number of members and if aspiring countries deliver on their reform agendas in an atmosphere of increased mutual trust, new enlargement waves will also become more likely.

The Strategic Regatta option will allow the EU to inject positive momentum into its enlargement policy at the present, critical and dangerous geopolitical juncture.

While candidates still bear the brunt of responsibility to fulfil the conditions for accession, this option foresees a greater onus on the EU to support the reform effort in the aspiring members with stronger, timely incentives (see EU enlargement recommendations #3 and 4) and to reform itself as proof that it is serious about further widening.

The gradual approach to the two processes will also **ensure that enlargement and internal reform can be adjusted in terms of speed and ambition in response to the evolution of the wider geopolitical situation** to keep up pace with developments and safeguard Europe's security at all times.

The Strategic Regatta option will allow the EU to inject positive momentum into its enlargement policy at the present, critical and dangerous geopolitical juncture, given that it already foresees a first enlargement wave during the current politico-institutional cycle (2024–2029), followed by subsequent rounds in the foreseeable future. The likely candidates for the first round are Montenegro and Ukraine – the former based on its performance in the accession process, the latter as a choice driven by exceptional security concerns in the Trump 2.0 era (see also EU enlargement recommendation #3).

But this initial thrust forward will only be sustained if subsequent accession rounds continue to happen after Wave I. The flow of this option would thus need to be captured and codified into a **detailed plan that spells out the how, when and under what conditions the gradual widening of the EU will take place.** While the exact timing and composition of the consecutive waves largely depend on political will in the member states and reform stamina in the candidate countries, they also reflect regional and global geopolitical dynamics at any given

moment. From this perspective, this option will allow the EU to roll out an organic, rational and tactical enlargement process.

Last but not least, while the EU will be gradually enlarging, **the Union and its members will have to find ways to politically and legally improve the EU's ability to protect its core liberal democratic principles and fundamental values.**

3.2.3 Speedy Big Bang Enlargement option (E1) – geopolitical bravery

The decision to integrate all current aspiring member states, which are eager to join, can send a strong political signal that the EU is determined to consolidate and secure its sphere of influence in response to tectonic geopolitical shifts. A Speedy Big Bang Enlargement of the Union to 30+ members is not necessarily a feasible idea at present. Concerns about the potential negative effects of letting into the Union a large number of countries at different levels of preparedness for membership tend to override any other considerations in favour of delivering a new big bang enlargement.

This frame of mind persists, although the biggest expansion of the Union in 2004 to 10 new members, followed by the accession of two more countries in 2007, did not hamper the overall efficiency of EU decision-making, not even during the five years in which it functioned on the basis of the Nice Treaty; the Lisbon Treaty only subsequently entered into force. With hindsight and beyond any 'digestion' problems that have occurred in the Union over the past two decades, it turns out that against a belligerent Russia, having all these countries inside the Union is far better than not.

In pure numbers, considering the size of their population, territory and economy, the combined EU accession of the Balkan and Eastern trio countries is also of a lower magnitude than the 2004/2007 big bang enlargement – a sort of 'mini bang' enlargement. However, the current aspiring member states face complex and stubborn problems of governance and statehood which the Union stands to import through a speedy, *en mass* enlargement. Experience suggests that such issues can backfire when the countries join, and the reform leverage then vanishes. Hence, the EU's stricter approach to the pre-accession conditionality applied on the current candidates.

The Union's enhanced methodology for enlargement has not yielded the expected results over the past decades.

Yet the Union's enhanced methodology for enlargement has not yielded the expected results over the past decades. Progress has been at best slow and regression increasingly common, the longer the integration process dragged on.

From this perspective, **the Speedy Big Bang option is a recognition that continuing to do the same and expecting different results is a misguided strategy, especially at a time when the geopolitical imperative cannot wait for the EU's leverage to start bearing fruits.** This option could thus shake up the enlargement policy and catch the Union's rivals off guard, who bet on a predictable and rigid EU.

The Union itself will have to commit to an ambitious process of internal reform in order to remain effective in a 30+ members format.

This enlargement option does not ignore the reforms needed for new entrants to be able to play a constructive role inside the Union and profit from their membership. Its merit is instead to refocus attention away from the pre-accession conditions, which do not seem to pay off – at least not fast enough – towards some form of post-accession plans on the basis of which the current and new members would work together for a functioning relationship and towards joint objectives of peace, prosperity and democracy. **The enlarging Union will thus have to find concrete ways to ensure that the new member states continue their reform process from within the EU.** The new entrants will also be subject to derogations and certain limitations to their full

membership rights until they have fulfilled all membership obligations. In addition, the Union itself will have to commit to an ambitious process of internal reform in order to remain effective in a 30+ members format, especially with respect to the need to substantially strengthen the EU's capacity to deliver security and stability inside and on its borders.

But how can the EU implement the Gradual Progressive EU Reform option in practice? How can it link reform and enlargement, elaborate a comprehensive reform plan, adapt the Union's governance system, use all potential reform avenues, allow the 'willing and able' to progress, and involve citizens from current and future EU countries in the reform process?

How can the EU implement the Strategic Regatta or Speedy Big Bang Enlargement in practice? How can the Union and its members define a new enlargement narrative and showcase that they are willing to widen the EU family? What kind of gradual enlargement roadmap will the EU require if the Union follows the Strategic Regatta option? How can one ensure that new members will continue to reform from inside the Union, if the geopolitical enlargement imperative requires a Speedy Big Bang Enlargement? How can the EU deal with bilateral issues? And how can the Union address democratic backsliding in the new and existing member states, and enlist greater support from civil society in the process?

The following part puts forward 12 recommendations on how the three preferred options and their combinations can be implemented in the future.

4. Twelve key recommendations to advance enlargement and reform

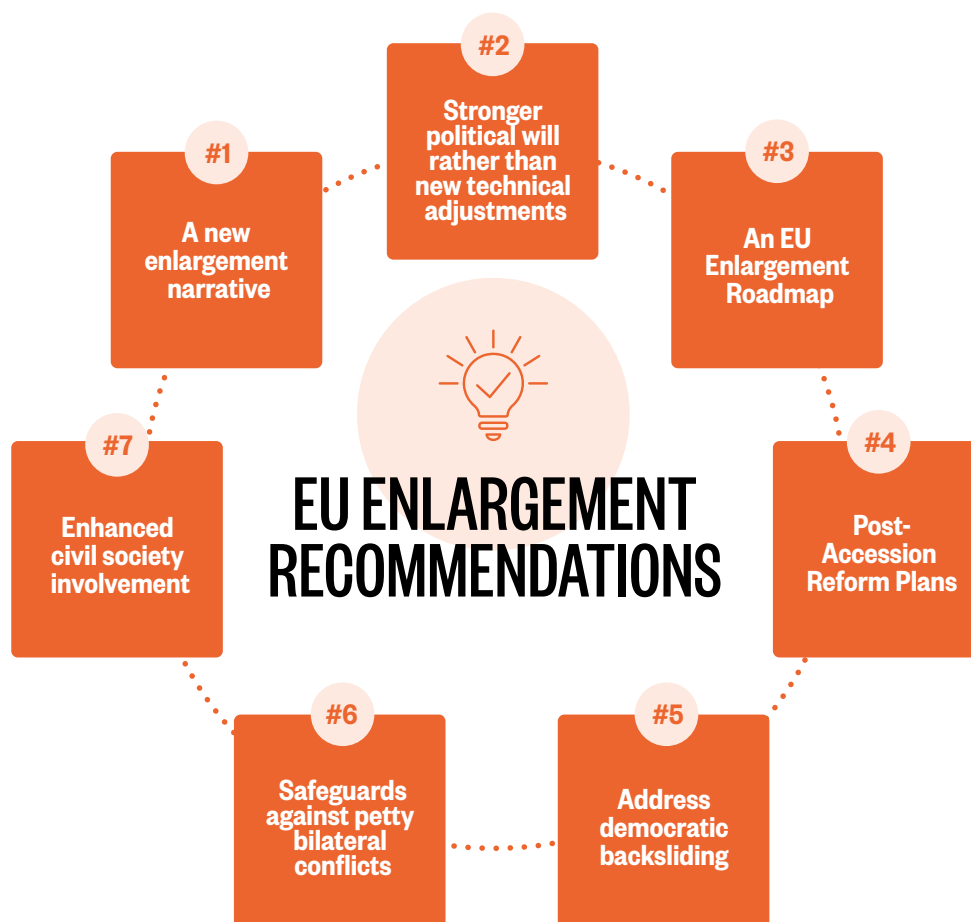
As the two strands of the Union's DNA, EU enlargement and internal EU reforms need to be thought together. The Union cannot fulfil its promise of membership, made to the Western Balkans and the Eastern trio, without adapting its operating system. But neither can the EU design a governance system fit for the future if it does not 'think enlarged' in view of a Union of potentially 30+ members.

This part of the paper presents proposals for how the three identified EU enlargement and EU reform options and their combinations can be implemented in practice. In total, it **puts forward 12 interrelated recommendations – seven on EU enlargement and five on internal EU reform – to ensure progress on both fronts.**

4.1 STRATEGIC REGATTA AND SPEEDY BIG BANG – SEVEN ENLARGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

To respond to the enlargement imperative described at the start of the paper (see section 1.1), the EU should either take in all aspiring member states as foreseen by the Speedy Big Bang Enlargement (E1) option (see section 2.1.1) or go for a gradual yet continuous expansion in line with the Strategic Regatta (E2) option (see section 2.1.2). But how can the Union deliver these options in a way that ensures that the Union remains functional with 30+ members and that existing EU countries feel reassured about the potential negative consequences of further and swift EU widening?

Figure 10



The following enlargement recommendations suggest that a successful EU widening will require the Union and its members to: **(1) adopt a new enlargement narrative**, which describes the policy as a means for the EU to mature politically in a challenging geopolitical context and as a way to strengthen the number of allies working together for peace, prosperity, fundamental rights, and liberal democracy on the European continent; **(2) muster the political will** to welcome new members instead of focusing on new revisions to the methodology for enlargement; **(3) elaborate an EU Enlargement Roadmap** to clarify the steps, resources and timeframes that will allow the Union to progress

on enlargement in the short to medium term; **(4) include Post-Accession Reform Plans** in the accession treaties to ensure that alignment with the EU *acquis* continues also after countries have joined the Union; **(5) strengthen existing mechanisms and reform Article 7 TEU to keep all members on track with the EU's foundational democratic values and principles**; **(6) set up safeguards against bilateral conflicts** between aspiring member states and their neighbours or with existing EU countries; and **(7) offer more help to bottom-up forces in the candidates** to hold domestic political elites to account and contribute to a larger extent to their European integration efforts.

4.1.1 EU enlargement recommendation #1 – a new enlargement narrative

#1
A new enlargement narrative

- Adopt more positive outlook in enlargement discourse
- Update enlargement narrative to reflect permacrisis
- Recognise that EU widening and deepening is in the enlightened self-interest of EU27 and candidates

The EU should update its enlargement narrative to better reflect the permacrisis reality in which the benefits of membership (including peace, prosperity, fundamental rights and democracy) are the fruits of cooperation between existing and new members – rather than the prize of accession. It should also better convey how the policy can help the Union evolve towards political maturity in an increasingly challenging geopolitical environment.

If enlargement continues to be predominantly seen as a dossier on which the EU27 *must* deliver due to commitments made in Thessaloniki in 2003 or because of the Russian threat in an increasingly volatile and dangerous geopolitical context, **the dossier will keep struggling to gain broad public support and reap successes.** Because both the sense of obligation and the fear for its own security put the EU in a ‘victim’ position, neither can sufficiently contribute to laying a solid foundation in the Union’s engagement with its vicinity.

As long as external pressures are seen as the main drivers of further EU widening, the Union will have a hard time opening its doors to new countries, or might eventually do so but only reluctantly. **A half-hearted expansion would most likely generate tensions and misgivings between member states in a potentially larger ‘club’**, fostering ever more internal fragmentation and European disunity once new members have joined the EU. This outcome would also defy the geopolitical logic of enlarging the Union in the first place.

Externalising the challenges related to enlargement is therefore ill-advised for the EU. While the Union might not always be capable of influencing the outside world, it does have control over its own evolution and direction of travel, as well as over the terms in which it goes about pursuing those. **The EU should thus claim agency for the future of European integration, in line with a vision that serves Europe’s specific ambitions and reflects its own value system.**

A half-hearted expansion would most likely generate tensions and misgivings between member states in a potentially larger ‘club’.

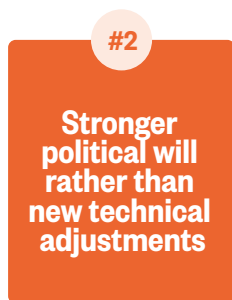
The viewpoint that the EU adopts and the strategic objectives it defines matter because they help to frame the narrative which underpins the Union’s action, affecting the outcome. **The discourse on EU enlargement should therefore adopt a more positive outlook on the reasons for bringing new members into the Union’s fold. It should recognise the widening and deepening of European integration as an act of preservation and enlightened self-interest.** There is great power in reinvention for the sake of longevity and to stay

ahead of the times – as opposed to merely keeping up with, or responding to, unfolding events. Just as there is great strength in having more countries – vulnerable by themselves – close ranks behind an agile European project of cooperation. The EU should step into its power!

But the enlargement narrative needs more than adjusting the EU’s perception on what the problem is and how it is seen. **The story that used to ‘sell’ enlargement at home and abroad also requires fine-tuning: promises such as ‘growth’, ‘order’, ‘security’, ‘travel’ and ‘opportunity’**

can no longer be taken at face value in the permacrisis era. Prosperity, peace and liberal democracy are now challenged also throughout the Union. Short of a realistic discourse on the real benefits, costs and trade-offs of membership in the light of ongoing adversity, the EU will continue to labour in its efforts to extract concessions from aspiring countries or to get member states and their electorates on board with further expansion. Bygone, semi-utopian promises remain valid goals, but the Union and aspiring member states should now work together for them.

4.1.2 EU enlargement recommendation #2 – stronger political will rather than new technical adjustments



- Enlarge during current politico-institutional cycle
- Strengthen political will to enlarge – technical know-how not missing
- Openly address key political obstacles
- Candidates must start head on to deliver good governance

The Union should be candid about enlargement to avoid the hypocrisy trap and improve its already bruised credibility internally and abroad. The EU’s attractiveness rests on its credibility. But ‘talk’ will not suffice to restore trust in the accession process; tangible actions are essential. **To walk the talk, the Union should enlarge during the current politico-institutional cycle by adhering either to the gradual Strategic Regatta (E2) option or the Speedy Big Bang Enlargement (E1)** (see also detailed descriptions of Strategic EU Enlargement Options 1 and 2). Further EU widening does not require another round of technical adjustments to the enlargement methodology; rather it demands the political will of the EU27 to extend the current borders of the Union.

The EU’s attractiveness rests on its credibility. But ‘talk’ will not suffice to restore trust in the accession process; tangible actions are essential.

On the basis of lessons learned from past accessions and also in response to the particularities of the Balkan region (such as war legacies and state weakness), the EU has upgraded the instruments and methods for carrying out enlargement on several occasions. **Since at least 2011, the approach to the policy has become more rigorous and complex than in any previous rounds, especially**

on the political dimension of the membership conditionality. The Copenhagen criteria⁵¹ for membership still apply but they have acquired new and more detailed meaning for the current EU-hopeful countries.

Aspiring member states must now get a head start on delivering good governance, that is, a functioning rule of law, independent judiciary, efficient public administration, the fight against organised crime and corruption, civil society development, as well as media freedom. Progress in these fundamental areas, largely captured in Chapters 23 and 24 of the negotiations, conditions countries’ overall progress in the accession process. Following the most recent revision of the enlargement methodology, adopted by the Commission in 2020, these stringent conditions have now been grouped into clusters and linked to more tangible rewards for the EU-hopeful countries. In addition, a mosaic of benchmarks, safeguard clauses, more routine procedures to suspend negotiations, and the requirement for candidates to demonstrate a solid track record of reforms ensures that the method for applying the conditions is also more exacting than in the past.

Through the various tweaks and fixes to its enlargement strategy, the Commission has tried to keep the process rolling and help the Balkan countries strengthen their democratic and economic systems. Yet, so far, **the results of the various revisions to the methodology have been underwhelming in terms of overall convergence between the region and the EU.** Autocratic rulers, sobering economic prospects, widespread poverty and inequality, aging populations, and brain drain are some of the key aspects in which enlargement policy has struggled to reap successes in the Balkans.⁵²

To be sure, **regional and country-specific issues have also played a major role in testing the transformative power of the EU's agenda for the region.**⁵³ The Balkan countries had to undertake a triple transition: from war to peace, from a communist command economy to a liberal market economy, and from single-party rule to a pluralist democracy. Resolving statehood issues by negotiating with neighbouring countries added a fourth *volet* to the region's challenges. The EU and its members had no ready-made solutions for such problems and the search for effective responses is still ongoing in the case of the Western Balkans. The Eastern trio faces similar transition-related issues, which means that the Union cannot expect different results in these cases by doing the same as in the Balkan context.

The experience thus far highlights that reform is not just a matter of EU prescription. It heavily relies on political will in the Union and in the aspiring member states – which is still missing in most countries. **How to engage with autocratically-minded leaders in the aspiring member states, who have little interest in promoting reform and good neighbourly relations, is a real dilemma. How to make sure that EU governments overcome the haphazard commitment to enlargement, due to the whims of domestic politics in the member states, remains a challenge.** This tenuous commitment harms substantial progress on the dossier and pushes potential future members to look for pragmatic alternatives in regional coalitions and with other powers. **These are key political obstacles that need to be openly addressed if the Union wants to turn the enlargement narrative into reality.**

Meeting the membership conditions remains the responsibility of the countries seeking to join the EU. However, a technical process – as strict and rigorous as it may be – will never suffice to deliver a larger EU without strong political resolve, an unshakable vision of a joint future and a lot more generous support from the Union.

Meeting the membership conditions remains the responsibility of the countries seeking to join the EU. However, **a technical process – as strict and rigorous as it may be – will never suffice to deliver a larger EU without strong political resolve, an unshakable vision of a joint future and a lot more generous support from the Union.**⁵⁴ This is why current proposals about **new technical adjustments to the process offer no guarantee that enlargement will advance** in a transformative way or produce new EU members.

Ideas for staged accession,⁵⁵ sectoral policy integration⁵⁶ or differentiated integration⁵⁷ are in some ways a reformulation and, at times, an intensification of existing practice to scatter incentives over a gradual process – while the concrete prospect of joining the Union remains vague. At the same time, innovations related to granting candidates observer status before accession, phasing in voting rights, ending QMV in the intermediary stages of negotiations, applying reversibility even after accession or creating an associate membership, in many cases represent a significant departure from the norm. To the extent that any of these suggestions **can inject dynamism into the process and make it more salient, their potential should be fully exploited. However, none of these individual changes amount to a grand initiative and there is always the risk that they could become a substitute for, or an excuse not to deliver, enlargement.** And if they are perceived as a proxy, they reduce the willingness of the aspirants to reform and undermine pro-accession arguments in the candidate countries.

Thus, insisting on further tweaking the accession procedures fails to recognise that **what is really missing is not technical know-how but political will to broaden the EU family.** An ever more volatile geopolitical situation might eventually wake up hesitant member states to the relevance of EU widening. But short of such a revelation, to get the Union to open its doors to new countries, it is paramount to address lingering concerns of member states regarding the potential implications of further enlargement(s). To that end, **the EU should establish robust democratic and security safety nets for all its members, as well as clear pre- and post-accession roadmaps and reform plans,** as suggested below (see EU enlargement recommendations #3 and 4). Such actions will not automatically make EU countries enthusiastic about enlargement and internal EU reforms but could help them warm to the idea of a bigger – yet still effective – Union.

4.1.3 EU enlargement recommendation #3 – an EU Enlargement Roadmap



- Roadmap follows logic of Strategic Regatta
- Wave I decided during current cycle (2024-2029)
- Montenegro and Ukraine part of Wave I
- EU widening continues after Wave I
- Final wave(s) aim(s) to integrate remaining candidates
- Stronger backing of candidates via more substantial and targeted EU support
- EU Enlargement Roadmap linked to Comprehensive EU Reform Plan

If the EU is to pursue the Strategic Regatta (E2) option (see Strategic EU Enlargement option 2), **new members should accede when they are ready and should be backed by more substantial and targeted EU support.** In parallel, the Union itself needs to prepare internally to accommodate the different consecutive enlargement waves in the coming years. **Internal EU reforms and enhanced incentives will be crucial to strengthen the ‘fair’ part of the ‘fair and strict’ approach to enlargement, and will help to restore the credibility of the EU membership promise.** The Union’s internal reform process along the lines of the Gradual Progressive EU Reform option (see also EU reform recommendations #1-5), as well as more substantial incentives for the candidate countries, distinguish this option from the current approach to enlargement.

From today’s perspective, countries like Montenegro and Ukraine could be first to join the Union in the coming years under the Strategic Regatta (E2) option. The sequence and timing in which the remaining EU-hopefuls will join the Union is less clear and depends both on the ability of the candidates to fulfil the demands set, as well as on the willingness of the EU to undertake the necessary reforms to be able to cope with progressively more members. Changes (for better or worse) in the geopolitical context could further affect the speed of the process in the context of this strategic option.

Despite all these variables, **the premise of the Strategic Regatta (E2) path is that enlargement will not stop after the next enlargement round but gradually proceed because it is in the Union’s strategic interest to do so.** Committing to enlarging the EU in subsequent waves is also a means to demonstrate that the policy is not only strict but genuinely fair. To mitigate some uncertainties and keep the process on track, **the Union should elaborate a clear, detailed and ambitious EU Enlargement Roadmap**, laying out the different steps, specific resources and timeframes (including concrete milestones) that will allow the EU to deliver enlargement in the short to medium term. These specifications will act as signposts to orient the candidates’ and member states’ action, while simultaneously highlighting the incentives for reform on both sides. **Ensuring clarity and accountability for all parties is the indispensable prerequisite for giving the process ‘teeth’ and credibility.**

The Roadmap should build on the Commission’s “in-depth reviews”, expected in Spring 2025, but go beyond what EU27 have been ready to do so far. **The EU Enlargement Roadmap should thus include (flexible) deadlines for the EU and candidates. It should also be linked to a Comprehensive EU Reform Plan** aiming at concrete adaptations of the Union’s operating system in the coming years (for more details see EU reform recommendations #1-3). All this will be **necessary to make sure that advances in the enlargement dossier go hand in hand with EU internal reforms**, ensuring synergies and positive spillover effects between the Union’s deepening and widening.

The **Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (ENEST) should lead in the elaboration of the Enlargement Roadmap.** Other DGs should be involved in sectorial work, especially policy fields that require more technical expertise (e.g. Single Market, agriculture, fisheries, cohesion or circular economy). The Commissioner for Enlargement should team up with the Commission President and the President of the European Council to ensure buy-in from all relevant stakeholders, including in particular stakeholders from those member states that will have to ratify the accession treaties via national referenda.

More concretely, the **EU Enlargement Roadmap should follow the logic of consecutive enlargement waves** reflecting a number of concrete considerations in each of the different rounds of EU widening:

- (1) **Wave I – Montenegro and Ukraine: The first enlargement wave should be decided during the current politico-institutional mandate (2024-2029) to make sure that the Union injects positive momentum into the policy at this critical geopolitical juncture.** From today’s perspective, Montenegro and Ukraine could be part of Wave I, although other candidates might also join the first round in case reforms in these countries help them to catch up in the course of the decade and/or if the geopolitical pressure to enlarge the Union grows (substantially) in the coming years.

Montenegro can be part of the first EU enlargement round, given that the country is best aligned

with the Union's *acquis* and the only one to have received a positive IBAR, which paves the way for the final stage of negotiations. Provided that Podgorica sustains the good work and closes all remaining negotiations chapters in the foreseeable future,⁵⁸ the Union can integrate a country the size of Montenegro (circa 600.000 inhabitants) without substantial EU policy and governance reforms (although the process of gradual internal EU reforms should still start as soon as possible). Adding an EU Commissioner from Montenegro to the College, redistributing seats in the EP to include Montenegrin MEPs, including the country at the EU's decision-making table, and integrating its small economy into the Single Market (with a GDP of €5.8 billion, accounting for 0.034% of the EU27's overall GDP) are entirely feasible measures for today's Union.

What could prove more problematic is the ratification of Montenegro's Accession Treaty, which would require referenda in some member states. This prospect suggests that the Union and relevant EU countries should invest resources and political capital into effective information campaigns to build public support for Montenegro's entry. These efforts should, *inter alia*, foresee the **organisation of a European Forum on Enlargement** aiming to intensify transnational debates about EU widening, increase public trust in the EU27 and candidate countries, foster knowledge about the benefits of the enlargement process, and thus help to generate public support for the ratification of the accession treaty (see also EU reform recommendation #5). In addition, a "Confidence Clause" should be affixed to Montenegro's Accession Treaty as a means to ensure that Podgorica will not block its neighbours' accessions once inside the Union (for more details, see also enlargement recommendation #6).

Given developments regarding the war in Ukraine and the need for the EU to strengthen Europe's security in the Trump 2.0 era, the Union might decide that Kyiv should also join in the first enlargement wave. In this case, the Union will have to prepare itself for the accession of a particularly big candidate (43 million inhabitants) that is heavily affected by the multiple severe (geo-)political, humanitarian, economic, and financial consequences of Russia's war of aggression. Considerations linked to (i) the adjustment of the EU's core spending policies (including the Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion Policy); (ii) the future of EU financing (in the context of the next MFF or even outside the traditional EU budget framework); (iii) enlargement-proofing the implementation of key EU priorities (including economic competitiveness and security as well as defence), (iv) adaptations of the Union's decision-making processes; (v) massive post-war reconstruction efforts; as well as (vi) measures aiming to strengthen Europe's defence in the context of a radically new security environment will have to be reflected in both the EU Enlargement Roadmap and the Comprehensive EU Reform Plan (see also EU reform recommendation #1).

If Ukraine joins the Union, it is safe to assume that many sensitive policy and governance questions, particularly those linked to security and democracy, will not be fully resolved in time for the first enlargement wave. Therefore, **the Enlargement Roadmap should foresee specific derogations related to the full implementation of the Union's *acquis* and structural reforms that will have to be tackled and implemented after Ukraine has entered the EU.** Consequently, the Union might have to cut corners on reforms in Kyiv or find innovative temporary solutions if Ukraine is to join the EU as swiftly as possible.

Independently of the state of affairs in Ukraine, the EU Treaties should cover the totality of the country's international boundaries, even if the Union's *acquis* might have to be suspended in any territory where the government in Kyiv does not hold sway. In doing so, the EU would follow the precedent it has set in the case of Cyprus, where EU law does not apply to the Turkish North.⁵⁹

- (2) **Wave II: EU widening should not stop after the first enlargement wave. The Union and remaining candidate countries**, which are determined to enter the Union, **should continue to show the political will necessary to broaden the EU family.** The exact timing and composition of this wave will depend on the success of Wave I, the ability of the Union to reform, the candidates' individual progress, as well as regional and global geopolitical developments. If the reform progress in the aspiring member states and the EU go in tandem, then a **second wave should include those countries that have achieved the most progress in adopting and applying the Union's *acquis*.**

From today's perspective, Albania (2.7 million inhabitants), **North Macedonia** (1.8 million inhabitants) **and Moldova** (2.5 million inhabitants) **could be part of Wave II**, given their reform record thus far. Provided that they continue along this path and that the Union's own gradual reform also advances (see EU reform recommendations #1-4), the accession of these countries will not place major strains on the EU's institutions and policies, in view of their small individual and combined size, as long as the Union will have adopted its operating system to the needs of an EU with 30+ members.

What could be **trickier is ensuring that bilateral disputes** (such as between Bulgaria and North Macedonia) **and statehood issues** (e.g. related to Transnistria in Moldova) **do not obstruct the process of delivering a second enlargement wave.** For North Macedonia, one-off solutions could be identified, while the Enlargement Roadmap should also include proposals for more comprehensive response mechanisms that can be effectively replicated for similar situations also in the long run (see also EU enlargement recommendation #6). For Moldova, the Union can build on the work done to address similar security concerns along the lines of the experience

that will be gained in the context of Ukraine's EU accession in Wave I. The remaining candidates also face frozen conflicts (e.g. South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, Transnistria in Moldova), so setting the steppingstone in Wave II for a sound strategy in this regard would be a prudent course of action given that doing so likely will take time.

- (3) **Final Wave(s):** Building on the success of previous waves, the final enlargement round(s) should aim to integrate the remaining candidates. From today's perspective, these will most likely include EU-hopefuls like Bosnia-Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Serbia and/or Türkiye, provided that they are willing and able to proceed on their individual tracks towards EU accession. **At present, all of them are confronted with political and/or security dilemmas which have so far left the Union at a loss for potential solutions.** In preparation for the final enlargement wave(s), the Enlargement Roadmap will have to spell out the steps that will allow the Union to further widen and simultaneously complete its operational restructuring to be able to take in all the countries still lined up for EU entry at that time.

Intractable challenges to their territory and identity have prevented most of these aspiring EU members from credibly engaging in the integration process. Authoritarian tendencies, as well as ties with Russia, have kept them laggard in the accession process and distanced them from Brussels. The Enlargement Roadmap should not lower but keep the accession bar high also in this phase, while in parallel indicating the reform avenue that these candidates will have to follow to reach the EU. To that end, the Union and its members should be more creative in identifying ways to help candidates overcome their sensitive problems, while at the same time guarding the Union against potential spillover security risks.

Given that the Final Wave(s) represent(s) the last stretch in the parallel processes of enlarging and reforming the Union, both of which will take time and hard work for all parties involved, **the EU should elaborate and provide incentives that can sustain the reform efforts of the candidates** until and throughout this phase.

The need to offer incentives will be particularly stringent if Serbia is relegated to the final round(s) of enlargement. Further delays to Serbia's EU accession could push Belgrade further into Putin's arms and increase public opinion's hostility and cynicism towards EU. But from today's perspective, the political nature and scope of Serbia's shortcomings on the way into the Union make it difficult to imagine an earlier EU entry. Yet, **Serbia remains a critical player for the stability of the Balkan region. Therefore, a geopolitically minded Union must find ways to keep or bring Belgrade back within its sphere of influence.**

Especially in the final enlargement wave(s), **the EU should go the extra mile in exploiting its political, economic and financial leverage.** Greater access to the Union's institutions, more substantial financial rewards, and deeper levels of gradual integration should be conditional on more ambitious reforms in the remaining candidate countries. The EU should use, for example, the bi-annual payments under the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans to practice such reciprocity.

Moreover, current proposals for incremental sectoral integration and/or institutional access (gradual integration) should be included in the EU Enlargement Roadmap and granted in return for conditions met, especially to countries that deliver consistently but might need to wait longer. From the offer of observer status in the Council and EP to Single Market access, integration into EU foreign and security instruments and further economic and social benefits, the Union should explore any idea that could help the countries in the antechamber to pursue their efforts to enter the EU. Certainly, given the growing pressures to strengthen Europe's security and defence, the Union should already consider involving the aspiring member states into its efforts to achieve strategic autonomy (see also EU reform recommendation #1).

The EU should elaborate and provide incentives that can sustain the reform efforts of the candidates.

4.1.4 EU enlargement recommendation #4 – Post-Accession Reform Plans

#4

Post-Accession Reform Plans

- Accession treaties specify potential derogations and transition periods
- Include clearly defined Post-Accession Reform Plans to ensure alignment with *acquis* after accession
- Commission keeps monitoring and evaluating new members after entry

If at some point the EU27 conclude that the gradualism principle of the Strategic Regatta (E2) approach does not live up to the gravity of the geopolitical storm gathering in Europe's neighbourhood, they might have to pursue a faster and more audacious option of welcoming all current candidates in one 'big wave' (see also Strategic EU Enlargement Option 1). The Union could thus deliver another 'big bang' moment, as it did back in 2004/2007, when the EU enlarged from 15 to 27 members (from 382 to 494 million European citizens) on the basis of a much less complex and rigorous conditionality than at present.

To ensure that new EU countries will gradually fulfil their obligations after entering the Union, the **accession treaties signed and ratified between the EU and each candidate should include clearly defined Post-Accession Reform Plans**. These Plans would ensure that alignment with the Union's *acquis* continues to be pursued post-accession and before each new member state can enjoy the benefits and rights of the 'club'. They will have to spell out the precise process, key milestones and concrete steps (including their timing) that each country must take from inside the EU before it can enjoy all benefits and rights associated with full membership. Access to voting rights and EU funds should be made conditional upon the new entrants sticking to, and implementing, the agreed Post-Accession Reform Plans.

Allowing all willing aspirants to accede at roughly the same time effectively means that countries will come in at different levels of preparation in terms of the Union's political and economic conditionality. The EU itself will also not be ready to effectively integrate a large number of new member states in a short amount of time on the basis of its current operating system.

Therefore, the Union will have to start its internal reform process as early as possible (see also EU reform recommendations #1-5), while also taking into account that it will have time to 'digest' the new entrants also *post hoc*. This means working with them within the 'club' to ensure that they can become fully-fledged members once they have met all outstanding conditions and any other obligations relevant in each case. Consequently, **the Post-Accession Reform Plans and the internal Comprehensive EU Reform Plan will become mutually reinforcing and have to occur simultaneously**. The

twist in this option is that they will have to unfold in the spirit of partnership, with the 'old' and 'young' member states already in the same boat.

The Post-Accession Reform Plans and the internal Comprehensive EU Reform Plan will become mutually reinforcing and have to occur simultaneously.

If reform efforts in the new EU countries have to continue post-accession, especially on the fundamentals, **the Commission will have to keep monitoring and evaluating the new entrants. The Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM)⁶⁰ applied to Romania and Bulgaria could serve as inspiration in this regard**. The CVM was set up as a transitional measure when the two countries joined the EU in 2007 and helped to facilitate their progress in the fields of judicial reform and anti-corruption, as well as on organised crime for Bulgaria, based on specific benchmarks.

The accession treaties should also specify potential derogations and transition periods in critical policy areas (e.g. environment, labour movement, Schengen and common currency). This would allow aspiring member states time to adjust, while also reassuring 'old' EU countries that the new entrants will fulfil all membership obligations over time. The Commission should start drafting the accession treaties with their respective Post-Accession Reform Plans as soon as possible because agreeing on the details therein, as well as ratifying the accession treaties once signed (which in some countries will require referenda), will take some time.

Ultimately, whether it is achieved via a Speedy Big Bang (E1) or the Strategic Regatta (E2) option, **a larger Union comes with risks to the democratic health and security of its members**, as well as to neighbourly relations. Instead of getting discouraged, **the EU should anticipate and address potential negative consequences of enlargement in these regards** (see enlargement recommendations #5-6), thus reassuring reluctant EU member states and electorates.

4.1.5 EU enlargement recommendation #5 – address democratic backsliding



- Strengthen application of existing rule of law mechanism and reform Art. 7 TEU
- Improve the Commission's reaction speed when MS sidetrack from democratic path
- Stronger and more systematic financial conditionality
- European parties assert pressure on sister parties deviating from EU values and principles

Without strong mechanisms to protect the enlarging Union's liberal democratic *acquis*, there is a risk that current or future EU members backtrack on commitments and/or disrupt European cooperation.

The growing incidence of threats to the Union's core principles and values has made it clear that cumulative progress achieved in preparation for EU entry can be reversible. Since all EU-hopeful countries encounter governance problems,⁶¹ democratic reform could come undone or to a halt upon their entry.

Of course, the potential exists for any member state to undermine EU democratic standards, not just newcomers. From this perspective, both existing and future EU countries can default on their fundamental membership obligations as part of the Union. Even if the lessons learned from previous enlargement rounds have inspired a stricter accession process, **the EU's enhanced approach to the enlargement policy is still more a pre-emptive strategy than a proven system to ensure that pre-accession reforms are sustainable post-accession.**

Therefore, the Union should draw on its experience with rogue members to **strengthen the application of existing mechanisms that aim to address rule of law regressions and/or to reform the Treaty provisions on EU values and the rule of law.**

With respect to the former, **the Commission, as guardian of the Treaties, should improve its speed of reaction when members get sidetracked from the democratic path** by swiftly and vigorously enforcing the tools and mechanisms it already has at its disposal.⁶² Moreover, the EU should set up new protocols to keep all members in line with the Union's foundational democratic values and principles including via a **stronger and more systematic financial conditionality.**

In this context, **the Commission should also link more closely and systematically its Annual Rule of Law Report to other Commission tools and procedures, including financial conditionality.** To enhance democratic accountability of the rule of law mechanism, the Council could also involve the EP into the institutions' Article 7 hearings by adapting the Council rules of procedure.⁶³

Finally, on the basis of existing legal rules, **political actors – including European political party families – should assert pressure on individual party members early on if their sister parties deviate from the Union's core democratic values and principles.** As experience shows, unduly protecting them tends to worsen the situation over time.

When it comes to a potential reform of the Union's primary law via the ordinary revision procedure, **the EU Treaties could be reformed by: (i) clarifying the conditions and scope of the application of Article 7 procedures and defining what constitutes a "clear risk of a serious breach" or "a serious and persistent breach";⁶⁴ (ii) introducing a super-qualified majority in the European Council to establish and act on a serious and persistent breach of the rule of law in a member state (Article 7(2) TEU);⁶⁵ (iii) adding a new provision to Article 7 TEU authorising the Council and the EP to adopt budgetary regulations protecting the EU's founding values enshrined in Article 2 TEU;⁶⁶ and/or (iv) amending Articles 7(1 and 2) TEU to include time limits of six months forcing the Council and European Council (EUCO) to take a decision in the event of a serious and persistent breach or risk of breach of EU values by a member state⁶⁷ (for more details on all these proposals see also EU reform recommendation #3).**

Without strong mechanisms to protect the enlarging Union's liberal democratic *acquis*, there is a risk that current or future EU members backtrack on commitments and/or disrupt European cooperation.

4.1.6 EU enlargement recommendation #6 – safeguards against petty bilateral conflicts

#6

Safeguards against petty bilateral conflicts

- ▶ Address bilateral issues more decisively and creatively
- ▶ Introduce of “confidence clause” in accession treaties to ensure new members cannot block future entrants
- ▶ Strike bi- and multilateral agreements solving specific bilateral conflicts
- ▶ Entrust disputes to external mediation

In the context of either the Strategic Regatta (E2) option or a Speedy Big Bang Enlargement (E1), **the EU will have to more decisively and creatively address the various bilateral issues that aspiring member states have with neighbours or existing EU countries.** The unresolved statehood issue of Kosovo or Republika Srpska’s threat to the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina have long been complicating the respective European integration paths of Belgrade/Pristina and Sarajevo, respectively. In a similar vein, the acrimonious name dispute with Greece and disagreements over language and identity with Bulgaria have repeatedly blocked North Macedonia’s progress towards the EU over the years.

The ethnic mosaic of the Balkan region, which does not match with its internal borders, as well as other pending consequences of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, means that **sensitive bilateral issues can continue to disrupt the enlargement process.**⁶⁸ This prospect extends to the Eastern countries, which also have disputed territories (e.g. Donbas in Eastern Ukraine, South Ossetia in Georgia and Transnistria in Moldova). In the Strategic Regatta (E2) approach, such a risk is compounded because countries can enter the EU at different points in time, which allows, at least in principle, every new member to stall the accession of its neighbour(s).

Although the Stabilisation and Association Process launched after the war in Kosovo put regional cooperation at the heart of its requirements for any EU-hopeful country, enlargement is a bilateral process and cannot include conditions linked to the mutual recognition of minorities, borders and good neighbourly relations. Furthermore, given that the Union itself has no common definition of a ‘minority’, no legislation in the field and no *acquis* on border issues, **the EU does not have the leverage to change the *status quo* through its current policy formats.**⁶⁹

For a long time and to no avail, the Union has tried to use the offer of membership and the accession process to solve such problems (e.g. via the EU-mediated dialogue for the normalisation of relations between Belgrade and

Pristina). With a new High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP) in place, the EU could **rethink the current format of the Kosovo-Serbia talks and facilitate a conversation on how to reform the Dayton Constitution in Bosnia.** In both cases, past attempts to reach backroom deals between political leaders without involving the broader population have failed to produce long-lasting agreements and allowed leaders to sabotage the process based on their short-term political calculations.⁷⁰ Future mediation efforts should thus make sure that negotiations are more transparent and include consultations with civil society and citizens so as to secure broad-based societal consensus for the outcomes.⁷¹

In addition, the EU should **introduce a “Confidence Clause”⁷² in the accession treaties to ensure that new members cannot block future accessions,** and that the Union does not import past conflicts. Such a clause should already be foreseen in the first enlargement wave (see enlargement recommendation #3), when Montenegro and potentially Ukraine join the EU. Moreover, to prevent countries invoking a lack of realistic membership perspective as an excuse to avoid resolving open bilateral problems, **the EU should strike bi- and multilateral agreements that solve their specific clashes** (e.g. Serbia should recognise Kosovo and North Macedonia should change its constitution to address Bulgaria’s concerns) **to be signed on the very same day the countries in question sign their respective accession treaty.**

The Union could also **entrust disputes to external mediation** (like the *ad hoc* arbitral tribunal in the disagreement between Slovenia and Croatia over the Gulf of Piran⁷³) **and put effective internal (political and/or economic) pressure on member states** which interfere with enlargement on the basis of unrelated conditions to the pre-agreed accession process. To remove member states’ temptation to use their veto power in the many, intermediate stages of the accession process (especially in the context of the Strategic Regatta (E2) option), the EU27 should also consider limiting the **unanimity requirement in the accession process as far as legally possible.**

4.1.7 EU enlargement recommendation #7 – enhanced civil society involvement



- Reduce executive bias of enlargement process
- Strengthen bottom-up pressures on domestic political elites in candidates
- Encourage political elites in candidates to use citizens' consultations on key reforms
- Decentralise pre-accession aid
- Involve CSOs in early stages of legislative process and European integration effort

Last but not least, the EU should **remove the executive bias of the enlargement process**, whereby governmental officials and civil servants – rather than politicians and civil society – exercise the main role in EU membership preparations. The transposition of the *acquis communautaire* during the accession process might be a largely administrative task, i.e. the candidate countries are not expected to debate it since it is non-negotiable, and Community law takes precedence over national legislation. Yet, **the lack of transparency and inclusiveness in the reforms or legislation adopted feeds public frustration with politics and disappointment with the EU**, especially when progress is slow or absent.

Since governments in the candidate countries can pay lip service to the goal of EU accession, **the Union should seek to strengthen bottom-up pressures on domestic political elites** to deliver the required reforms. The ongoing student protests in Serbia are only the latest example of the vast scope of popular dissatisfaction with politicians; it is also instructive to note that public support for EU integration in Serbia is the lowest in the entire region.⁷⁴ Elsewhere in the Balkans and in Georgia,⁷⁵ for example, people are equally dissatisfied with their national leaders and cynical about the prospect of EU accession in the future.⁷⁶

To improve the quality of reforms and develop workable solutions that resonate locally, the EU should enhance CSOs' involvement in the accession process and streamline their interaction with domestic and EU institutions.

The EU does not 'only' need more reform-minded allies, which can be scarce at the highest political level in the Balkans and the Eastern trio countries. **Citizens and civil society in the candidate countries need the EU to acknowledge and help them with their grievances. The civic sectors in the aspiring member states want to have more influence over decision-making and be able**

to hold their political representatives more directly to account. They call for more involvement in their countries' European integration efforts, and for greater transparency. For that reason, EU-facilitated agreements reached behind closed doors between high-level politicians in the aspiring member states tend to face opposition from citizens, as the experiences of Bosnia and Kosovo-Serbia demonstrate.⁷⁷

While the EU already recognises the importance of civil society organisations (CSOs) in the EU integration process,⁷⁸ their participation is still often seen as a box-ticking exercise and their full potential remains untapped. To improve the quality of reforms and develop workable solutions that resonate locally, the EU should enhance CSOs' involvement in the accession process and streamline their interaction with domestic and EU institutions. **It should encourage political elites in the different countries to rely more on citizens' consultation processes around key reform items** and provide technical support for the candidates on difficult and more demanding policy areas (such as the environment).

More generous financial opportunities (such as via the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) for the candidates) for CSOs to implement deliberative processes on EU-relevant issues of broad-based interest could also help. To make sure that financial support reaches society more directly, **pre-accession aid should be decentralised by making sure that money streams do not flow only through the central government.** Twinning and TAIEX (the Commission's Technical Assistance and Information Exchange instrument) programmes should also be re-evaluated, and the local level should be more systematically sponsored. The local private sector, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and independent media groups need far more attention and support from the EU than they presently receive.⁷⁹

In addition, **the Commission should update its list of CSO contacts to go beyond the 'usual suspects' and reach smaller NGOs**, which might work on underrepresented topics. The Union should also insist that governments in the aspiring member states **involve civil society actors in the earlier stages of the legislative process**, where their input can still make a difference for policy outcomes, and not just in the oversight of law enforcement. **The**

EU should also encourage the Commission’s DGs working on specific policy and developmental aspects of the negotiations (e.g. agriculture, fisheries, cohesion, and circular economy) **to strengthen their links with civic actors that deal with these topics** in the candidate countries. CSOs’ expertise in European affairs and technical knowledge in areas relevant to the EU *acquis* can be of added value to the Union. Thus, **civil society should be seen as a subject of politics, instead of an object of policies.**

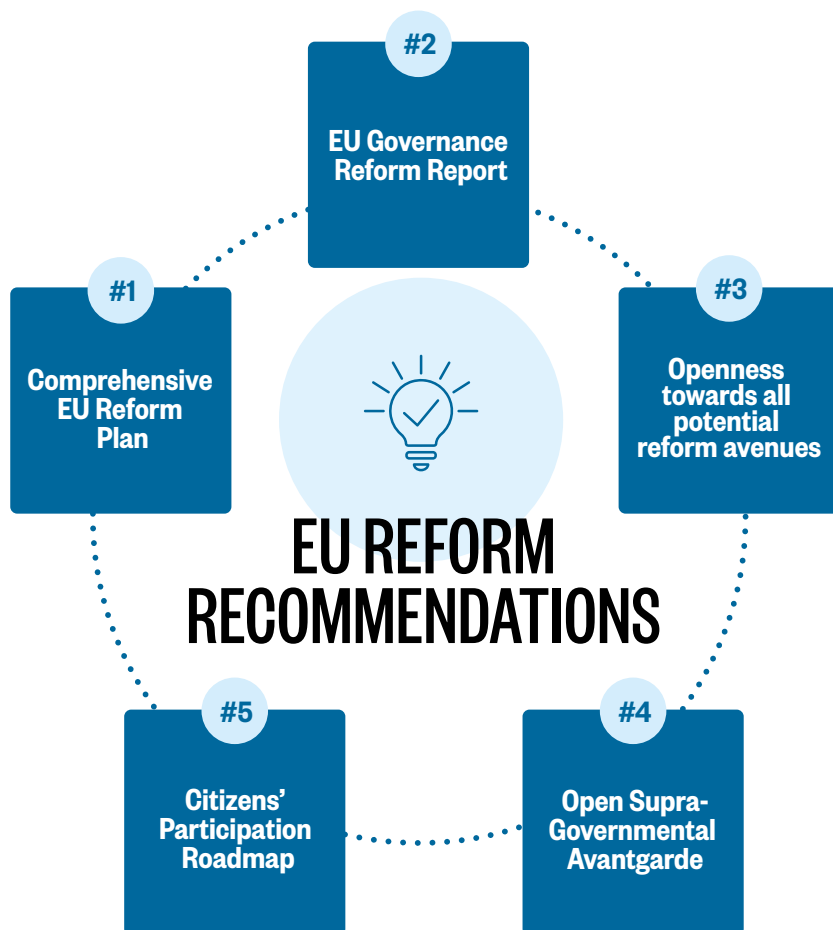
Finally, **the EU should do more to support the aspiring member states in catching up economically and socially.** Financial assistance towards candidate countries is currently far below the help received by member states, which makes convergence difficult to achieve.⁸⁰ If anything, the gap has been widening between the EU countries and candidates, exacerbated by the permacrisis and the war in Ukraine. But improving living standards and life opportunities is critical for the ability of citizens in the EU-hopeful countries to demand effective democracy from their political leaders. Growing preoccupations with every day, bread-and-butter issues and pessimism about the future tend to push people towards radicalisation (i.e. to vote for authoritarian leaders) or emigration (i.e. brain drain) in search of better living conditions and more opportunities for their children. As such, reform-oriented forces are depleted and development interrupted in these contexts. **Supporting candidate countries’ development today is an investment in the Union’s own future.**

4.2 GRADUAL PROGRESSIVE EU REFORM – FIVE EU REFORM RECOMMENDATIONS

Irrespective of which of the two identified enlargement options the EU chooses to pursue, i.e. either the Speedy Big Bang (E1) or the Strategic Regatta (E2) option, the selected path will have to intersect with a **gradual and progressive reform of the Union to make the EU enlargement-, future- and crisis-proof.**

To respond to the reform imperative described at the start of this paper (see section 1.2), the Union’s gradual reform track should encompass the following **five key elements**: **(1)** the adoption of a **Comprehensive EU Reform Plan** that is more ambitious, more comprehensive, more detailed, and more concrete than what is currently on the table; **(2)** the elaboration of an **EU Governance Reform Report** mandated by the European Council, which aspires to inject a new lease of life into the institutional reform debate and overcome the existing deadlock among the EU27; **(3)** a gradual internal EU reform process displaying **openness towards all potential reform avenues**; **(4)** the ability of the ‘willing and able’ to deepen their level of cooperation in the context of an **Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde (OSGA)**, especially in the area of defence and if some EU governments decide to block enlargement; and **(5)** the elaboration of a **Citizens’ Participation Roadmap** aiming to generate debates and broad public buy-in regarding EU enlargement and internal EU reform.

Figure 11



4.2.1 EU reform recommendation #1 – Comprehensive EU Reform Plan



- EU elaborates ambitious and concrete Reform Plan to:
 - enlargement-, future- and crisis-proof CAP and Cohesion Policy
 - enlargement-, future- and crisis-proof all potential forms of EU financing
 - enlargement- and crisis-proof implementation of core EU priorities
 - prepare Dynamic Reform Roadmap
 - foster gradual integration
 - undertake EU Governance Reform

Preparations for a **gradual progressive reform of the EU will require the elaboration of a Comprehensive EU Reform Plan**, which considers (i) the needs deriving from EU enlargement, while reflecting whether the policy will follow the Strategic Regatta (E2) or the Speedy Big Bang (E1) paradigm; (ii) the manifold challenges deriving from a highly uncertain (geo-)political, (geo-)economic and liberal democratic future; and (iii) the likelihood that Europeans will face new chapters of the permacrisis, which the Union has been experiencing since 2007/2008, especially with respect to the future of EUrope’s security.

To make the Union enlargement-, future- and crisis-proof, the Comprehensive EU Reform Plan will have

to be more ambitious, more comprehensive, more detailed, and more concrete than what is currently on the table, including with respect to the objectives incorporated in various European Council Conclusions, the plans elaborated during the Belgian Council Presidency in the first half of 2024, and the proposals brought forward by the first von der Leyen Commission in its Communication on “pre-enlargement reform and policy reviews”, published in March 2024 (for more details see Infobox 2).⁸¹ **As soon as possible, EU leaders should provide guidance on when, how and to what extent the enlarging Union should in the coming years reform its operating system to the needs of the new era.**

INFOBOX 2: The state of affairs regarding enlargement and internal EU reforms

In June 2024, the EUCO took note of the Commission’s Communication on “pre-enlargement reform and policy reviews” (published in March 2024) and invited the Commission to present “in-depth policy reviews” by Spring 2025, containing “operational elements” on **four strands: (1) values; (2) policies; (3) budget; and (4) governance**.⁸²

These four strands had already guided the “Progress Report on the Future of Europe”, which the Belgian Presidency presented in June 2024.⁸³ Being more concrete and explicit than the EUCO Conclusions, the Belgian Presidency report proposed a reform process divided into three steps: Step 1 foresees the definition of long-term ambitions and common objectives, which should enable the EU to act effectively in the face of a “new geopolitical reality and increasingly complex challenges”; Step 2 calls for reflections on possible reforms along the lines of the four reform strands; and Step 3 should lead to more concrete reflections on the “instruments and ways” to introduce possible reforms.

Responding to the EU leaders’ invitation and the process proposed by the Belgian Presidency, the political guidelines of the second von der Leyen Commission specify that the Commission will present its “pre-enlargement policy reviews” in Spring 2025. The reviews shall focus on individual sectors such as the rule of law, the Single Market, food security, defence and security, climate and energy, migration, as well as social, economic and territorial convergence more broadly.⁸⁴

The Commission’s upcoming Communication is likely to reflect the proposals it had presented in March 2024, when the Brussels executive considered the impact

of enlargement on EU policies, as well as the need to equip candidates and potential candidates with the tools to adapt to the Union’s evolving policies. However, in line with the revised enlargement methodology, the Commission’s **Communication had a predominant focus on “gradual integration”**, which offers (potential) candidates “enhanced avenues” into selected EU policies ahead of their accession, by frontloading certain benefits and obligations of EU membership, with accession remaining the final objective.⁸⁵

In more concrete terms, the Commission’s communication looked into different areas of gradual integration, including the rule of law, the (Digital) Single Market, Energy Union, CAP, Common Fisheries Policy, Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), EU cohesion policy, tax acquis, internal security, migration, CFSP, as well as Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).

While it concentrated on identifying ways to gradually integrate (potential) candidates, the **Commission was much more reserved on aspects related to the EU’s future budget (from 2028 onwards) and potential reforms of the Union’s governance structure**. This is largely explained by the fact that the Brussels executive did not want to push the dossier too far given that **issues related to both the next MFF and/or the Union’s future institutional structure are very uncertain and highly contentious among the EU27 and between EU institutions**.⁸⁶ The reform proposals from the European Parliament, for example, are much more ambitious than what national capitals are ready to agree on.⁸⁷

More specifically, the Comprehensive EU Reform Plan will have to provide guidance regarding the following six key elements:

(1) Adapting CAP and Cohesion Policy: The EU's core spending policies must be adjusted to the financial needs of a Union of 30+ members, given that future enlargements will lead to substantial net costs in the EU budget, which are yet to be realistically quantified.⁸⁸ In its “pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews” (March 2024), the Commission announced that enlargement would be one of the topics included in its upcoming proposals, expected in July 2025, for the next MFF covering the years from 2028 onwards. In this context, the EU will have to adapt its policy priorities and spending related to the CAP and Cohesion Policy in particular, given that these expenditure blocks still account for around two thirds of the Union's current MFF (2021-2027).⁸⁹ EU enlargement towards the Western Balkans and the Eastern trio, independently of whether the Union follows the Strategic Regatta (E2) or the Speedy Big Bang (E1) option, will substantially increase the financial pressures on the CAP and Cohesion Policy, especially if Ukraine joins the Union early on (e.g. in Wave I; see EU enlargement recommendation #3).

Thus, while **these policy areas will need to be proactively adapted to the needs of an EU30+** so that enlargement can advance, expenditures foreseen in the next MFF should concentrate more spending on future-oriented policy objectives – especially those related to dealing with the future of European defence, measures aiming to enhance Europe's collective competitiveness, as well as the financial consequences of the poly-transition. In addition, the next MFF discussions should lead to a reform of the Union's own resources system, given that the bulk of the Union's revenue still comes from direct contributions from the member states. In future, the **EU should establish new forms of direct revenue to allow for more spending on commonly agreed European public goods,** responding to the needs of an enlarging EU.⁹⁰ This will also be necessary to enable the Union to cover the repayment costs related to the grants and loans provided to member states in the context of NextGenerationEU (NGEU) from 2028 onwards, without substantially limiting future EU budgets.

(2) Enlargement- and crisis-proofing all potential forms of EU financing: Beyond the financial means foreseen in the next MFF, chances are high that the implementation of future policy objectives will require funding that goes beyond the traditional EU budget/MFF. The example of NGEU which was prompted by the need to collectively respond to the severe economic implications of the COVID19 crisis, has shown that **major financing needs cannot be solely covered within the traditional EU framework.** It is safe to assume that in the coming years the EU27 will require additional forms of financing that extend beyond the traditional MFF and involve some forms of

joint borrowing mechanisms in areas like security and defence (see also EU reform recommendation #4).⁹¹ Given that some EU governments might not be ready to move in this direction, **additional forms of financing might have to be sought outside the Union budget via the creation of intergovernmental funds,** which are able to issue bonds backed by national guarantees from participating countries rather than the EU as a whole (see also EU reform recommendation #4).⁹²

Should cooperation along these lines become necessary, especially with respect to defence in an enlarging Union, **future potential EU countries and other non-EU countries associated with the Union (like Norway, Switzerland or the UK) should in principle be allowed to participate** in relevant projects and funding schemes. Limiting participation to current member states would be politically and fiscally misguided in the present geopolitical environment and send the wrong signal to those threatening Europe's security (see also EU reform recommendation #4).

(3) Enlargement- and crisis-proofing the implementation of core EU priorities: Given the severe geopolitical and geo-economic pressures on Europe, the 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda of the European Council⁹³ and the political priorities of the second von der Leyen Commission shore up the efforts to enhance the EU's economic competitiveness and security⁹⁴ and strengthen European defence and holistic preparedness. The implementation of recommendations included in the reports prepared by Mario Draghi (economic competitiveness),⁹⁵ Enrico Letta (Single Market)⁹⁶ and Sauli Niinistö (preparedness)⁹⁷ will be key in this respect and should, from the outset, be directed towards the policy needs and opportunities deriving from an EU of 30+ members. To achieve this aim, **future EU countries should be actively associated with the process leading to the implementation of the Union's key policy priorities** (including the implementation of the Competitiveness Compass⁹⁸). They should be included as much as possible, in the spirit of gradual integration, even before they join the Union.

In the context of an enlarging EU, **particular emphasis will have to be placed on the future of European defence,** especially given that Ukraine might enter the Union under difficult conditions, potentially including unresolved border issues with Russia. The same goes for the other Eastern candidates, which also have disputed territories (South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia; Transnistria in Moldova). If countries of the Eastern trio were to join the EU, either through the Strategic Regatta (E2) option or via a Speedy Big Bang Enlargement (E1), it is not far-fetched to imagine that Putin's Russia would be tempted to strike back, by dragging the EU and its members into more direct, conventional or unconventional (hybrid), forms of confrontation. In addition, Moscow could step up its interference through the political and economic ties that many aspiring member states in the Balkans already have with the Kremlin.

Efforts to enhance EUrope’s future security architecture must take these considerations into account. To ensure that candidate countries will not be mere policy recipients, **aspiring member states should be proactively involved in the policy-shaping process and the implementation of all decisions aimed at strengthening EUrope’s defence capabilities.** Not only do they have much to contribute, they will also be greatly affected by the future of EUrope’s security architecture.

The Commission’s White Paper on defence⁹⁹ (“European Defence Readiness 2030”¹⁰⁰) presented in March 2025 foresees a close cooperation with Ukraine and all “like-minded European, enlargement and neighbouring countries”.¹⁰¹ However, potential forms of cooperation need to be spelled out in more detail and fully implemented in practice. As the White Paper acknowledges, Ukraine will be key in this context, given that it will be a central cornerstone for the future of EUrope’s security. However, other potential future members of the EU family should also be closely involved, given that their security will be strongly affected by developments in the area of defence.

- (4) **Elaboration of a Dynamic Reform Roadmap:** The Comprehensive Reform Plan should include a Roadmap that **defines concrete implementation stages and milestones** for the internal EU reform process in the coming years. In the light of the uncertainties related to the enlargement process, **the Roadmap should be dynamic to allow for the potential need to adjust the speed of the reform process to any future rounds of EU widening.** In other words, the Dynamic Reform Roadmap should enable the EU to implement reforms depending on whether the Union will enlarge itself according to the Strategic Regatta (E2) or the Speedy Big Bang (E1) options.
- (5) **Fostering gradual integration:** Depending on the Union’s chosen enlargement path, the EU Reform Roadmap also needs to consider a potential gradual integration of new members. The Belgian Presidency Report from 2024 already calls for a “gradual integration, facilitating an incremental, but also reversible, implementation of measures, rights and obligations over time.” The Union should allow enlargement countries more access to EU institutions and more substantial financial rewards, in return for more ambitious and faster reforms. From the offer of observer status in the Council and EP to Single Market access, integration into EU foreign and security instruments and further economic and social benefits, the Union should explore additional avenues to help the countries in the antechamber to keep going on their way into the EU.

In case of a Speedy Big Bang Enlargement (E1) new member states will also be subject to gradual reform and adaptation processes following their formal accession, thus requiring a close alignment between the EU Reform Roadmap and the Post-Accession Reform Plans. The latter must ensure that alignment with the EU’s *acquis* continues after a new member has joined the Union and before it can enjoy all the benefits and rights of full EU membership (see EU enlargement recommendation #4).

- (6) **EU Governance Reform: Regarding the future of the Union’s operating system, a reform of EU governance should go beyond the objectives identified in the Belgian Presidency Report.** The Report calls on the EU27 to “explore the potentialities and capabilities” of the current Lisbon Treaties, regarding the working methods of the institutions, the Council’s decision-making capacity, gradual integration, and allowing some member states to cooperate closer in specific areas via, for example, the instrument of enhanced cooperation.¹⁰²

Given that the Union’s current operating system is neither enlargement- nor future- or crisis-proof, the EU and its members should be ready to **adapt EU governance in response to the manifold uncertainties and challenges related to the new (geo-)political and (geo-)economic environment** confronting an enlarging Union (for more details, see EU reform recommendation #2). In the spirit of a gradual internal reform, **the Union and its members should consider all potential avenues for adapting the EU’s operating system, without excluding any possibilities**, which could help to put the Union in a better position to deepen and widen (see EU reform recommendation #3). Should some EU capitals resist a deepening of European cooperation, the **‘willing and able’ should explore alternative avenues inside or outside of the Union’s framework** (see EU reform recommendation #4).

The Union and its members should consider all potential avenues for adapting the EU’s operating system, without excluding any possibilities.

4.2.2 EU reform recommendation #2 – EU Governance Reform Report

#2

EU Governance Reform Report

- European Council mandates independent authority to produce EU Governance Reform Report aiming to break existing deadlock among EU27
- Report conceptually prepares governance reforms and promotes political buy-in among EU27 and between EU institutions
- Two basic options for independent authority: 'Wise Wo|Men Group' or Draghi | Letta | Niinistö Model

In line with the general objectives set out in the Comprehensive EU Reform Plan, it will be necessary to elaborate in more detail which internal EU governance reforms are required for an effective implementation of the defined objectives. To provide a necessary impetus to the debate and break the existing deadlock among the EU27 regarding a potential reform of the Union's operating system, **an independent authority should be mandated by the European Council to elaborate an EU Governance Reform Report.**

Over the past 15 years and under severe pressures, the Union has been able to tame the different phases of the permacrisis via *ad hoc* crisis reactions. But in a massively changing regional and global environment, **the EU and its members have not managed, ever since the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaties in 2009, to structurally adapt the Union's existing governance system.**

An independent authority should be mandated by the European Council to elaborate an EU Governance Reform Report.

EU leaders have in principle acknowledged the need to reform the Union. But **member states do not agree on what should be done to enhance the EU's ability to act, and how this reform process should unfold in practice.** The Granada Declaration adopted by the heads of state or government in October 2023 and the Conclusions of the European Council in December 2023 acknowledge that the Union needs to lay the necessary "internal groundwork and reforms", with a view to "making the EU stronger and enhancing European sovereignty".¹⁰⁵

In more concrete terms, EU leaders have agreed that the Union's policies must be "fit for the future" and "financed in a sustainable manner", and that the institutions of an enlarging EU should be able to continue to function effectively. But **the European Council still needs to decide when, how and to what extent the enlarging EU's governance system will be adapted to the needs of the new era.** EU leaders have only agreed that, by summer 2025, the European Council will adopt conclusions on a roadmap for future work on internal reforms.¹⁰⁴

In preparation for decisions that need to be taken at the highest political level, and building on the work carried out during the Swedish (first half of 2023) and Spanish Presidencies (second half of 2023), **the Belgian Presidency report on the future of Europe (June 2024) acknowledged that the EU "as we know it" has not been "conceived for today's polarised, fragmented world order."** In this context, the Report declares that the need for reforms stems from the triple challenge to: (1) "retain and improve the functioning and capacity to act"; (2) adapt to a "new geopolitical environment and a rapidly changing world"; and (3) prepare the EU for enlargement.¹⁰⁵ In more concrete terms and with respect to the future of EU governance, the Report states that the Union needs to "retain and improve its capacity to act" in terms of its internal functioning.¹⁰⁶ But while EU leaders acknowledge the need to make the Union "fit for the future", **the Presidency Report advocates that the EU should follow a "pragmatic approach" while exploring the "potentialities and flexibilities" of the current Treaties.**

This 'pragmatism' reflects the predominant mood among the EU27 when it comes to structurally improving the Union's operating system, which requires the unanimous support of all EU countries. There is certainly no consensus among **the EU27 on whether or how to use the possibilities provided by the Lisbon Treaties to improve the Union's capacity to act, let alone move beyond the institutional provisions of the current Treaties.**

One important case in point is the **opposition of the vast majority of member states to changing the existing decision-making rules in the Council** by using the *passerelle* clauses foreseen in the Lisbon Treaties (for more details see also EU reform recommendation #3).¹⁰⁷ This political reality is openly reflected in the Belgian Presidency Report, which states that there is only "some support" among the EU27 for increasing the use of QMV in the Council. But even this support is limited to some "subdomains" of policy fields, such as CFSP, social policies, taxation, and the internal market.^{108 109}

But the EU27 do not 'only' struggle to agree on a potential amendment of the Union's decision-making rules. **The inability of member states to progress on internal EU reforms goes much deeper and is one of the most contested issues among the EU27 and between EU institutions.** It thus comes as no surprise that the reflections on possible reforms related to the future of EU values¹¹⁰,

EU policies¹¹¹ and the EU budget¹¹² included in the Belgian Presidency report remain rather vague and lack ambition.

So, how can the EU overcome the present stalemate? **To inject a new lease of life into the institutional reform debate and overcome the existing deadlock, an independent authority should be charged with the task of elaborating an EU Governance Reform Report.** This report should present proposals and recommendations on how the Union's operating system could be adapted in light of the challenges that an enlarging EU will face in the age of permacrisis.

This independent authority should **prepare a conceptual framework for a reform of the Union's governance structures and help to promote the political buy-in among member states and between EU institutions.** It should identify concrete governance reform proposals and specify concrete avenues for how these could be implemented in practice (see also EU reform recommendation #3). The authority should act independently while reflecting the institutional reform proposals identified by the European Parliament,¹¹³ ideas brought forward by citizens in the context of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE),¹¹⁴ as well as the recommendations included in the report of the Franco-German working group on EU institutional reform.¹¹⁵

In addition, the proposals of **the independent authority should reflect the potential institutional consequences of the analysis and recommendations proposed in the reports prepared by Mario Draghi, Enrico Letta and Sauli Niinistö.** These reports include aspects related to the future of EU governance, which require further elaboration in terms of their overall scope and depth. Put differently, **the EU Governance Reform Report should be an extension of the Draghi, Letta and Niinistö reports.** This is particularly necessary since none of the three reports put forward thorough governance proposals. This approach likely reflects – at least in part – the authors' concerns that governance-related proposals would politically undermine the chances of their policy recommendations being picked up by the EU27, especially given that many of them would

require the support of all member states.

The **mandate for the EU Governance Reform Report should come from the European Council**, which includes not 'only' the 27 heads of state of government – the ultimate "masters of the Treaties" – but also the President of the European Commission. Concretely, there are **two options** for how the EU Governance Reform Report could be mandated:

- ▶ **Option #1 – “Wise Wo|Men Group”:** EU leaders ask a “Wise Wo|Men Group”¹¹⁶ or “reflection group”¹¹⁷ to expand upon the recommendations of the EU Governance Reform Report aiming to improve the overall functioning of the EU. The Group should be led by an eminent personality, who enjoys trust at the highest political level. S/he should be able to choose the other members of the Group, while making sure that the Wise Wo|Men Group includes both experienced EU experts and political heavyweights, as well as well as members drawn from younger generations and candidate countries.
- ▶ **Option #2 – Draghi | Letta | Niinistö Model:** Alternatively, the elaboration of the EU Governance Reform Report could be assigned to an individual eminent personality, as was the case for the Draghi, Letta and Niinistö reports. S/he would be individually responsible for preparing the Report, with the support of independent experts of her/his own choice coming from within and outside the EU institutions.

Irrespective of whether the European Council picks Option #1 or #2, Mario Draghi, Enrico Letta and Sauli Niinistö should be consulted in the process leading to the EU Governance Reform Report. In addition, the **independent authority should be asked to monitor the implementation of the Report and, if necessary, adapt its recommendations** in line with future developments, especially with respect to the future path of EU enlargement. Last but not least, the outcome of the process leading to the **EU Governance Reform Report should also be discussed with citizens from all over Europe** in the framework of the three potential instruments proposed below in the EU Citizens' Participation Roadmap (see EU reform recommendation #5).

4.2.3 EU reform recommendation #3 – openness towards all potential reform avenues



- ▶ Gradual reform of EU's operating system
- ▶ Governance reform open to all potential reform avenues:
 - technical and functional adaptations
 - full exploitation of Lisbon Treaties
 - targeted surgical treaty amendments
 - institutional adaptations via EU accession treaties
 - fundamental treaty reform via European Convention
- ▶ Independent authority identifies potential treaty amendments

In light of the severe (geo-)political, (geo-)economic and democratic challenges Europe faces, the EU will require a gradual adaptation of the Union's operating system.

Complex and interrelated obstacles and crises keep stacking up, and the EU and its members will not be able to ignore the limits of the current Union indefinitely.

The operating system of an enlarging EU needs to be upgraded, so that EUrope can respond effectively to the multiple tests of the new era, independently of whether the Union decides to enlarge gradually or in one go. Therefore, **the question is not whether the EU should reform, but rather when, to what extent, and how it will do so**. In this context, the Union and its members should be ready to use all potential EU reform avenues.

The operating system of an enlarging EU needs to be upgraded, so that EUrope can respond effectively to the multiple tests of the new era.

In view of a Union of 30+ members, **a reform of the EU will have to encompass all necessary concrete changes related to the accession of new members**, including an adaptation of the allocation of seats in the EP, the overall size and (potential) composition of the Commission, and any other enlargement-related institutional changes that might be required. In most cases, these (limited) institutional tweaks can be implemented either via internal regulations, the accession treaties or via legal provisions already included in the existing EU Treaties.

However, in the new era, **a gradual reform of the EU's operating system will have to go beyond concrete changes related to enlargement, given that the Union's current institutional set-up is neither enlargement- nor future- and crisis-proof**. If the EU27 want to effectively confront the ongoing agglomeration of chronic and acute crises, determining the way ahead is not about the false choice between incremental or radical change. At this point, reform in the context of the evolving permacrisis will have to be continuous and radical. Put simply, **the permacrisis requires 'perchange' – EU institutions and members must internalise and accept that change will be constant in the coming years**.¹¹⁸ The need to reform the EU must thus be reflected both in the overall objectives set by the Comprehensive EU Reform Plan and in the design of the process aiming towards a progressive reform of the Union's operating system.

Clarity regarding the Union's overall objectives is a political prerequisite for determining the potential nature and extent of the governance reforms required to secure and improve the functioning of the EU. It is imperative that member states commit themselves more concretely to the need to strengthen the Union's governance system and the process leading in this direction, even if the final outcomes of both enlargement and gradual reform are not clear from the outset.

The proposals included in the Comprehensive EU Reform Plan and the recommendations put forward in the EU Governance Reform Report could help to reassure member states who fear that internal EU reform might go too far and undermine their position in the Union's politico-institutional system.¹¹⁹ **Transparency about the**

potential scope and depth of the reform process will be necessary to ensure that EU governments are open to future governance reforms.

In this context, the work of the independent authority on an EU Governance Reform Report will be particularly important in case an internal EU reform might, at some point in time, require another European Convention. The latter will have to be well prepared and be subject to a concrete mandate in order to increase the chances that the EU27 will agree to a more fundamental reform process and that an amendment of the EU Treaties will, at the end of the reform process, be ratified in all member states.

In view of the process leading to internal adaptations, **experience has shown that reforming the Union's institutional make up may require more than one attempt**, as was the case in the process that led to the Lisbon Treaties. Like in the past, chances are high that the reform process will require numerous iterations and potentially also a more fundamental reform of the EU Treaties via a European Convention. The gradual reform process that led from the Maastricht Treaty (1993) to the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaties on 1 December 2009 took the Union 16 years. However, **lessons from previous reform processes and the forces of perchange**, driven by (geo-)political and (geo-)economic shocks, the 'poly-transition', and fundamental challenges to the future of liberal democracy **should help member states to understand the gravity of the moment and speed up the internal EU reform process as far as possible when compared to the past**.

It is imperative that member states commit themselves more concretely to the need to strengthen the Union's governance system.

Ultimately, **the exact path towards EU reform will also depend on the chosen enlargement option**. If the EU is to pursue the Strategic Regatta (E2) option, the objectives and sequence of internal reforms laid down in the Comprehensive EU Reform Plan and Dynamic Reform Roadmap must align with the different enlargement waves – starting with concrete governance and policy adaptations necessary to accommodate the needs of the first round of EU enlargement (Wave I) (see also EU enlargement recommendation #3). In case of a Speedy Big Bang Enlargement (E1), the EU should carefully assess which reforms need to be carried out before all countries join, and how the internal EU reform process will continue after the new members have joined the 'club'. This approach should help to sync enlargement and internal EU reforms, ensuring synergies and positive spillover effects between the Union's deepening and widening.

In more concrete terms, a gradual reform of the EU's governance system reflecting the proposals included in the EU Governance Reform Report should be open to all possible governance reform paths, including the following

five reform avenues: (1) technical and functional governance adaptations; (2) exploitation of the existing reform options based on the Lisbon Treaties; (3) targeted surgical treaty amendments of the EU Treaties; (4) institutional adaptations via EU accession treaties; and (5) a fundamental treaty reform via the ordinary revision procedure, including a European Convention.

(1) Technical and functional governance adaptations via practical efforts to improve the functioning of EU institutions on the basis of the Lisbon Treaties. These changes could relate to the working methods of individual EU institutions (from policy conception and analysis to implementation and enforcement) or relate to the Union's overall inter-institutional functioning. They could, for example, include: (i) a thorough review of the EU's administrative machinery; (ii) technical adaptations of the Union's provisions to safeguard the rule of law and EU values;¹²⁰ (iii) better regulation and simplification; (iv) fostering the Union's foresight capacity; (v) streamlining future MFF discussions and negotiations; (vi) improving euro area governance; (vii) revising the roles of the High Representative and

the European External Action Service (EEAS) in the interinstitutional setting;¹²¹ (viii) setting up strategic task forces to improve the implementation of key policy objectives, particularly in those areas where there is a strong overlap of competences between the European and the member state level; (ix) improving the functioning of the Commission via, for example, the establishment of an 'Executive Bureau' involving the highest levels of the Commission college;¹²² or (x) exploring novel ways to enhance the role of citizens' participation in EU policymaking (see also EU reform recommendation #5).¹²³

(2) Fully exploiting the Lisbon Treaties by using the institutional reform possibilities offered by the Union's existing primary law, most notably the various *passerelle* clauses (bridge clauses) (see INFOBOX 3) or other mechanisms foreseen by the current Treaties linked, for example, to the existing differentiation instruments (see also EU reform recommendation #4) or a reduction of the size of the Commission college by a third, as already stipulated by the EU Treaties (Article 17(5) TEU).¹²⁴

INFOBOX 3: General and specific *passerelle* clauses

The Lisbon Treaties includes **two types of general *passerelle* clauses** (Article 48(7) TEU) that allow for changes to the foreseen legislative procedure without a formal amendment of the EU Treaties:

- (1) The **first general type** allows to **move decision-making from unanimity to QMV** in the Council. It applies in case of legislative proposals where the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) or Title V of the TEU (which concerns the EU's external action and common foreign and security policy) specify that the Council should act by unanimity, although the latter does not apply to decisions with military implications and in the defence field.
- (2) The **second general *passerelle* clause** applies to special legislative procedures where the TFEU stipulates that the Council is the sole legislator, while the EP is only consulted or asked for its consent. Here, the *passerelle* clause allows a switch from the special legislative procedure to the ordinary legislative procedure (formerly known as co-decision), which foresees the full co-legislative involvement of the EP.

The **process for applying the general *passerelle* clauses** is as follows: after receiving notification

from the European Council that the use of a general *passerelle* clause is being proposed, national parliaments have six months to register their veto. In addition, a majority of the Members of the European Parliament must give their consent to the application of the *passerelle* clauses.

The biggest hurdle to applying such clauses is the need for the European Council to approve the application of either type of general *passerelle* clauses by unanimity. This means that **every EU country has the ability to veto the use of the bridge clauses**.¹²⁵

In addition to the general *passerelle* clauses, the EU Treaties include also **specific *passerelle* clauses** which apply to six specific policy areas common foreign and security policy (Article 31(3) TEU); family law with cross-border implications (Article 81(3) TFEU); social policy (Article 153(2) TFEU); environmental policy (Article 192(2) TFEU); the multiannual financial framework (Article 312(2) TFEU); and enhanced cooperation (Article 333 TFEU).

Although the procedure to use the specific *passerelle* clauses is less complicated than for the general bridge clauses, the basic decision still requires the unanimous support of all EU countries.

To improve the EU's governance system, member states should in principle use all possibilities provided by the Union's current primary law. However, despite numerous attempts to do so in the past, the EU27 have demonstrated (very) strong reluctance to use the general or specific *passerelle* clauses in practice. Some member states are fundamentally opposed to using the existing bridge clauses, while others have shown an inclination to use them to improve the Union's decision-making system. However, even the latter do not agree on which areas the *passerelles* should be applied to, and some EU countries merely pretend to be politically willing to use them, while knowing that this would require unanimity in the (European) Council and that it will be politically impossible to secure this support.

- (3) **Targeted surgical treaty amendments** resulting in limited specific changes of the EU Treaties which are deemed legally necessary to improve the functioning of the EU, especially if these are not possible on the basis of the Union's existing primary law. Such amendments can be implemented in the framework of the so-called **simplified revision procedure** (Article 48(6) TEU). Contrary to the ordinary revision procedure (see below), the simplified revision procedure does not require a complex Convention, which would involve a plethora of actors, and a subsequent IGC, including member state governments.

However, **amendments implemented via the simplified revision procedure** also have to pass a very high institutional hurdle, given that although they can be adopted directly by the European Council, they still **require a unanimous decision of all heads of state and government**. Subsequently, the EP and the Commission must be consulted, and the entry into force of respective amendments is subjected to 'approval' by each member state under its own constitutional requirements.

The application of the simplified revision procedure is not only difficult, but also legally limited by the fact that it cannot be used to amend all provisions of the EU Treaties. It is 'only' applicable to amendments of Part Three of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), which relate to the internal policies and action of the Union, with one major exception: if the proposed amendment of an internal policy provision leads to an increase in the EU's competences, then the ordinary revision procedure will have to be used instead.

In any case, given that the simplified revision procedure is limited to Part Three of the TFEU, it is **not applicable to the Treaty on European Union (TEU)** and does not allow modifications of provisions included in other parts of the TFEU on the institutional and financial provisions (Part Six), the Union's external action (Part Five), or the principle of non-discrimination and citizenship of the Union (Part Two).¹²⁶

Even though the simplified revision procedure is limited and difficult to apply, it has already been used

to amend the EU Treaties at a difficult moment for the Union. It was used in the context of the 'euro crisis', in March 2011, when the European Council adopted a decision to amend the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union by adding a new paragraph to Article 136 TFEU. This targeted treaty amendment provided the legal base for the introduction of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM).¹²⁷ **In future, the simplified revision procedure could be used also in other specific cases, provided that all member states come to the conclusion that a surgical treaty change is necessary** and that the simplified revision procedure can be legally applied to that end.

- (4) **Institutional adaptations via EU accession treaties** can also lead to internal reforms and modifications of the Union's primary law. Accession treaties between the member states and the acceding country on the basis of Article 49 TEU are legally binding intergovernmental treaties ratified by all existing and future EU countries in accordance with their constitutional requirements.

Reforms via accession treaties must not be limited to adaptations directly related to the country joining the Union, they can also lead to other institutional adjustments. The EU could thus use accession treaties as an indirect vehicle to pass institutional reforms which require a legal base rooted in the Union's primary law. If such reforms are part of an accession treaty, this can increase the chances of amendments being successfully ratified, given that a potential rejection of an accession treaty would also prevent the country concerned from joining the Union.

Treaty reforms via a European Convention will be unavoidable if the EU27 decide, at some point, to fundamentally reform the EU's governance system.

- (5) **Fundamental treaty reforms via a European Convention** based on the ordinary revision procedure enshrined in the EU Treaty (Article 48(2-5) TEU). This reform avenue will be **unavoidable if the EU27 decide, at some point, to fundamentally reform the EU's governance system**, which will require substantial changes to the Union's current primary law.

The use of **the ordinary revision procedure is highly complex, and it is by no means certain that amendments will ever enter into force**, as was seen in the case of the Constitutional Treaty, which was rejected in 2004, after the 'non' and 'nee' expressed in the respective French and Dutch referenda. This is one key reason why member states hesitate to use the ordinary revision procedure, as they fear that legal treaty amendments might again fail, especially given that many EU governments oppose a further deepening of European integration.

INFOBOX 4: The ordinary revision procedure

The ordinary revision procedure (Article 48(2-5) TEU) foresees that any member state government, the EP or the Commission can submit to the EU Council a proposal to amend the EU Treaties. The Council then needs to submit these proposals to the EUCO and the national parliaments of the member states are notified. If the EUCO decides to examine the proposed amendments, a Convention will be convened by the EUCO President composed of representatives of the national parliaments, heads of state or government, the EP, and the Commission.

The Convention shall then examine the proposals for amendments and adopt by consensus a recommendation to an IGC involving representatives of the governments of all member states. The IGC is convened by the EUCO President with a view to adopting by consensus the proposed amendments to the EU Treaties. The changes to the Union's primary law apply only after they have been ratified by all member states in accordance with their constitutional requirements.

Although the process of the ordinary revision procedure is rather complex and lengthy (see INFOBOX 4), it would be necessary in case the primary law of the enlarging EU needs to be substantially amended. Concretely, **the following potential governance reforms will require a more fundamental amendment of the EU Treaties** based on the ordinary revision procedure:

- ▶ making it possible to **trigger the general *passerelle* clauses by a (super-)qualified majority** vote instead of unanimity in the Council;
 - ▶ **extending the ordinary legislative procedure** based on QMV in the Council and co-decision with the EP beyond the areas covered by one of the aforementioned *passerelle* clauses;
 - ▶ **switching from unanimity to QMV on Article 352 TFEU** ('flexibility clause' or 'contingency clause'), which allows the Union to act in areas where EU competences have not been explicitly granted in the Treaties but are necessary to achieve the objectives set out in the Treaty. Currently, the use of the 'flexibility clause' requires unanimity in the Council and also, since the Lisbon Treaties, the consent of the EP;¹²⁸
 - ▶ converting to a **(super-qualified) majority vote in the Council in the field of foreign policy**, security and defence, for example, by moving from the current unanimity to a four-fifths majority;
 - ▶ **broadening the scope of co-decision rights for the EP** and lifting restrictions on the oversight of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in this regard;
 - ▶ removing treaty prohibitions on the **judicial authority of the ECJ in the field of the EU's external activities** (including a revision of Article 275 TFEU);¹²⁹
- ▶ reflecting the need to **further strengthen existing EU tools and processes to ensure respect for, and the protection of, the rule of law and fundamental values** in an enlarging Union (as advocated in the Belgian Presidency Report on the Future of Europe), the EU and its members could:
 - clarify the conditions and scope of the application of Article 7 procedures to limit political (in)action, mainly by **defining what constitutes a “clear risk of a serious breach” or “a serious and persistent breach”**.¹³⁰ This could be done by either changing the respective treaty provision in the TEU or in the context of a Protocol or a Declaration attached to the Treaty on European Union;¹³¹
 - **introduce a super-qualified majority in the EUCO to establish and act on a serious and persistent breach of the rule of law** in a member state (Article 7(2) TEU), for example, by a four-fifths majority instead of unanimity. In addition, one could also amend Article 7 TEU, so that not only the member state that is the subject of the vote, but also other member states with ongoing Article 7 procedures, would be excluded from the vote in the European Council under Article 7(2) TEU;¹³²
 - reform Article 7 TEU by **adding a new provision authorising the Council and the EP to adopt budgetary regulations protecting the EU's founding values** enshrined in Article 2 TEU on the basis of the ordinary legislative procedure;¹³³
 - amend Articles 7(1) and 7(2) TEU to **force the Council and the EUCO to take a decision within six months in the event of a serious and persistent breach or risk of breach of EU values** by a member state and the inclusion of automatic sanctions five years after a proposal to trigger the procedure;¹³⁴

- ▶ **transferring EU decisions on defence initiatives** (such as the use of the EPF of the European Defence Fund (EDF)) **to QMV in the Council** as part of the CFSP;¹⁵⁵
- ▶ revising the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU to establish the **use of QMV plus full co-decision with the EP to both the revenue and expenditure side of the EU budget** by amending Articles 311 and 312 TFEU;¹⁵⁶
- ▶ **installing a ‘sovereignty safety net’** if QMV is extended to additional policy areas, which allows member states to refer a decision to the European Council if they consider their vital national interest to be at stake;¹⁵⁷
- ▶ **introducing transnational lists** into the EU’s primary law;
- ▶ **harmonising national electoral laws** and thus Europeanising the elections to the EP;
- ▶ **raising the maximum number of MEPs** above 751 to allow for more adequate representation of new countries in a Union of 30+ members;

- ▶ **and agreeing to amend EU Treaties in future with a four-fifths majority of member states**, the EP’s consent to the agreed amendments, and a ratification threshold of four fifths of EU countries. This would preserve the possibility for, but also the democratic legitimacy of, future treaty changes in an EU of 30+.

All these potential treaty amendments, which aim to increase the Union’s institutional effectiveness and strengthen the governance system of the enlarging EU, cannot be done through the other aforementioned reform avenues. They would require a change of the current EU Treaties based on the ordinary revision procedure. Given the current (strong) opposition of member states to moving in this direction, the **independent authority mandated by the EUCO to elaborate an EU Governance Reform Report should be explicitly asked to identify which treaty amendments it deems necessary**, even if these reforms would require the use of the ordinary revision procedure, including a European Convention, a subsequent IGC, and the ratification of a new EU treaty by all member states. The **identification of concrete treaty reforms by an independent authority could inspire the mandate of a future Convention** and thereby address and potentially reduce the fear of national capitals that member states would lose control over European decision-making as a result of a fundamental amendment of the existing EU Treaties.

4.2.4 EU reform recommendation #4 – Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde

#4
Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde

- ▶ ‘Willing and able’ can progress if some EU governments block EU-wide progress
- ▶ Pro-Europeans do not sacrifice ambition for hollow and illusory unity
- ▶ Coalitions of willing able to deepen cooperation in context of an Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde (OSGA)
- ▶ OSGA particularly urgent in defence and if some governments block enlargement

More than ever, Europe needs ambitious progress in response to the fundamental external and internal challenges confronting the Union and its members. However, **chances are high that some EU governments will be reluctant to move forward in the future and might even block further steps in this direction and cooperation at the EU level.** But in view of the tectonic shifts unfolding, the ‘willing and able’ EU countries need to be more ambitious in case an agreement on how to move forward within the existing EU framework cannot be found among all member states. Therefore, **alternative routes**, including intergovernmental forms of cooperation, should be explored, provided that they do not undermine the Union’s supranational institutional set-up. **This course of action will be especially necessary in the area of defence and in case some EU governments prevent the Union from enlarging in an increasingly dangerous geopolitical environment.**

Experience over the past years, including in the context of adopting the EUCO’s 2024-2029 Strategic Agenda, has shown that **the EU27 struggle to define and agree on an ambitious joint strategic vision**, let alone a concrete strategic plan, given major differences among member states (governments) on core strategic issues and questions.¹⁵⁸

EU countries and institutions have shied away from conducting a realistic assessment of where the EU stands, and whether the Union has reached the point where it should have been at this moment in time. The fundamental challenges related to Europe’s security and the inability of the EU and its members to assume more responsibility in their direct neighbourhood following the geopolitical challenges posed by the actions of the Trump administration show that **the enlarging Union still has much to do if it aspires to reach the political maturity needed in the new era.**

To move with more ambition henceforth, **the enlarging EU requires a brutally honest assessment of where it stands, a compass showing the course it must follow, and a realistic but also ambitious plan to achieve its goals, even if not all governments are ready to move in this direction.** If some member states prevent the Union from progressing, EU countries ready to deepen their level of cooperation should, as a second-best option, proceed on their own. They should do so even if parallel avenues might have to extend beyond the narrow legal confines of the current EU Treaties, as was done in the case of the ESM or the Fiscal Compact.

In theory, groups of countries could move forward by using the mechanisms of differentiated integration available in the Lisbon Treaties, including the instruments of enhanced cooperation (Article 20 TEU and Article 329 TFEU) or permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) (Articles 42(6) and 46 TEU). However, experience has shown that **member states are (very) reluctant to use the existing instruments of differentiation**, given that their application is rather complex in practice and on many occasions reaches legal limits, especially if they touch on areas where EU legal norms apply to all member states, for example on Single Market issues.¹³⁹

Despite these difficulties, some legal experts argue that member states ready to strengthen their cooperation within the Union via the instrument of enhanced cooperation could not only use this differentiation instrument, but go a step further and adopt a new treaty among themselves to create what Jean-Claude Piris calls a **“Political Community”**.¹⁴⁰ If ambitious, this treaty could allow participating member states to exercise enhanced cooperation on the basis of QMV (rather than unanimity). Decisions of the “Political Community”, binding only the participating countries, would be taken in the Council, composed of all member states, but only the participating countries would have the right to vote. However, this option seems rather unlikely, given that it might in the case of some member states necessitate the revision of their national constitutions and the subsequent organisation of national referenda, thus raising huge political and legal hurdles that would be difficult to overcome.¹⁴¹

Going even further, **the ‘willing and able’ could**, as the ultimate response to a situation in which the diversity of views among member states about the future progress of European integration becomes irreconcilable, **decide to create a new supranational Union outside of, and in parallel to, the ‘old EU’**.¹⁴² Right from its inception, this ‘new Union’ would have to aim at a much higher level of supranational integration involving the immediate transfer of national competences and thus the pooling of sovereignty far beyond the current level inside the ‘old EU’. The legal basis of the ‘new Union’ would have to be laid down in a separate treaty (or constitution) and its institutional set-up would involve the creation of new supranational institutions.

In terms of membership, the ‘new Union’ could be both open to members of the ‘old Union’ but also to other European countries (including EU candidate countries), who wish to join the newly created federal club.

However, setting up such a new entity can only be a last resort because it would lead to massive legal uncertainties and huge political risks, fundamentally weakening the ‘old EU’ and opening up potentially new and deep dividing lines in Europe. Chances are high that rivalry would split Europe into two opposing camps – the members of the ‘new Union’ versus the excluded states – and likely push those left outside to seek allegiance in other (geo-)political constellations.

So, is there an alternative path that the ‘willing and able’ member states could pursue, if progress cannot be achieved within the EU framework on the basis of existing legal instruments and mechanisms, and if the creation of a separate ‘new Union’ should be avoided?

One possibility is that the ‘willing and able’ intensify their level of cooperation in the context of an ‘Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde’.

One possibility is that the **‘willing and able’ intensify their level of cooperation in the context of an ‘Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde’ (OSGA)**,¹⁴³ allowing them to progress outside the EU framework while adhering to a set of predefined principles that ensure respect for the Union’s institutional set-up and the community method.

Acting outside the EU Treaties would create parallel legal frameworks, imply the absence of judicial oversight of the ECJ, and eschew the democratic oversight of the European Parliament. To counter these potential institutional drawbacks and risks, **a number of safeguards should be applied, to ensure that the Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde will:**¹⁴⁴

- (1) **be open to all member states** willing to join and respect the common underlying principles;
- (2) **involve or even strengthen the role of EU institutions** in differentiated areas based on intergovernmental cooperation among participating countries;
- (3) **keep non-participating member states constantly informed**;
- (4) **refrain from setting up new permanent parallel institutional structures** outside the Union;
- (5) aim to **integrate the legal norms** adopted and the cooperation initiated outside the EU into the Union’s treaty framework **as soon as possible**;
- (6) and, to the extent possible, **involve key non-EU partners and countries that aspire to join the Union** in those areas where the ‘willing and able’ are ready to deepen their intergovernmental cooperation.

The formation of coalitions of the willing will create club goods rather than public goods, having a demonstrable outsider/insider effect. The creation of such an Avantgarde would likely generate a centripetal momentum pushing EU governments to join the 'club' in order to, first and foremost, avail of its benefits. As a result, there is a danger that some countries may attempt to free ride initially and may subsequently become obstructive forces. Therefore, any structures created in the context of an **Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde will also require a forced expulsion mechanism**, which can be applied to any participating country when it no longer follows, or when it actively undermines, the common strategic direction and principles underlying the Avantgarde.¹⁴⁵

One area in which the creation of such an Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde seems particularly urgent is defence. EUrope needs to be prepared to take more responsibility for its security, especially if the enlarging Union and its members will have to live with an aggressive Russia for years to come and if the current US administration is no longer willing to provide the means necessary to co-guarantee Europe's security.

EUrope needs to be prepared to take more responsibility for its security, especially if the enlarging Union and its members will have to live with an aggressive Russia for years to come.

Russia has not 'only' invaded Ukraine, Putin's war of aggression is a direct threat to the continent's security, especially now that the actions of Trump 2.0 are undermining Europe's existing security architecture. And an EU enlargement including Ukraine along the lines of either the Strategic Regatta (E2) option or a Speedy Big Bang Enlargement (E1) does not preclude the risk that Moscow might try to retaliate, including by dragging the EU into more direct, conventional or unconventional, hybrid forms of confrontation. Therefore, **Europeans should prepare for future direct and indirect confrontations with Russia; only by getting ready for a potential escalation can Europe hope to limit Putin's aggression.**¹⁴⁶

Convinced that EUrope's collective defence capabilities is a common European good that needs to be ambitiously and continuously pursued, **willing member states should be ready to jointly and massively invest in European defence cooperation, financially supported by targeted joint and common borrowing mechanisms.** The current level of collective spending on joint projects and procurements in the area of defence is far from sufficient.¹⁴⁷ It thus needs to be increased and sustained over a long period of time.

The proposals included in the Commission's White Paper on Defence (March 2025) point in the right direction. Yet chances are high that the 'willing and able' will have

to go further in the future. The financial means foreseen in the proposed SAFE (Security and Action for Europe) instrument, which includes up to €150 billion in loans to member states until 2030¹⁴⁸, will not suffice either in terms of volume or in the sense that it does not provide for EU grants on the basis of joint borrowing. In addition, SAFE (or any other potential form of EU defence funding) should be open to all accession countries and not 'only' to Ukraine, as currently proposed.¹⁴⁹

Bearing in mind political and constitutional concerns in a number of member states and following the model pursued in the context of NGEU, the **new money raised would have to be ad hoc, target specific objectives (e.g. a common defence shield), and collectively financed from outside the traditional MFF.** The latter could involve the creation of an intergovernmental Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) to issue jointly underwritten bonds to fund front-loaded investment in jointly procured defence equipment.¹⁵⁰ Such a fund could be managed by an existing institution such as the European Investment Bank (EIB). Again, the creation of a supra-governmental avantgarde in the area of defence should in principle be open to countries aspiring to join the Union.

Moving towards a fundamentally more differentiated EUrope will not only be politically difficult; it will also entail legal and institutional risks. It is no coincidence that the EU and its members have, in recent decades, avoided major forms of differentiated integration in key policy areas. There are **valid reasons why one can argue that more radical forms of differentiation are dangerous for the Union's overall coherence and future**, as it has the potential to undermine unity, foster distrust between the 'outs' and 'ins' and, thus, potentially open new dividing lines in Europe.¹⁵¹

However, these risks are massively outweighed by the urgent need to overcome internal blockades and enhance EUrope's capacity to act. **All too often, ambition and concreteness are sacrificed to the need to preserve unity among the EU27.** But if pro-Europeans sacrifice ambition for a hollow and illusory unity among all member states, they risk continued failure with severe consequences, especially with Donald Trump back in the Oval Office.¹⁵²

All too often, ambition and concreteness are sacrificed to the need to preserve unity among the EU27.

This risk would be intensified if some EU governments prevented the Union from enlarging in an increasingly dangerous geopolitical environment. In this case, and especially **if some EU leaders would not allow Kyiv to join the 'club', those in the Union who are ready to support Ukraine and other candidates** eager to deepen their political, economic and defence-related ties with other European states **might be compelled to use the possibilities offered by an Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde.**

The OSGA could serve as a means to deepen the level of cooperation among themselves and with others, who are (still) outside the Union but see their future in a liberal EUrope.

To sum up, given the European and global *Zeitenwende* we are experiencing, **the risks of a more differentiated EUrope are outweighed by the urgent need to overcome blockades and strengthen Europe's capacity to act.**

If the 'willing and able' can make progress, they will also put pressure on other EU countries to follow suit. Conversely, **if Europeans sacrifice the necessary level of ambition for the sake of unity, they run the danger of continued under-delivery, which in turn will further undermine the Union's legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens and play into the hands of those who want to radically downscale the level of European integration.** So, even if a fundamentally higher level of differentiation in the context of an Open Supra-Governmental Avantgarde entails some dangers and is politically difficult to bring about, it might be the radical change that EUrope needs.

4.2.5 EU reform recommendation #5 – Citizens' Participation Roadmap



- To generate broad public debate and buy-in, the EU should adopt a Citizens' Participation Roadmap to deliberate enlargement and reform
- Roadmap includes three instruments involving citizens and representatives from EU27 and candidates:
 - European Citizens' Reform Panel
 - European Forum on Enlargement
 - Future of EUrope Debates

In view of a complex EU enlargement and internal reform process ahead, there is a need to generate broad public buy-in and support in both the member states and aspiring countries for EU widening and deepening. To prepare the involvement of citizens, the **Union and its members should agree on and elaborate a Citizens' Participation Roadmap including concrete instruments of citizens' participation.**

There is a need to actively involve citizens and policy-makers from all levels of EU governance in debates about the perspectives for European integration. **Following the notion of "thinking enlarged"¹⁵³ these processes will require the inclusion of citizens from all over EUrope.** Contrary to the experience of the CoFoE, citizens and other representatives from (potential) future EU countries should be given an active role in discussions aiming to carve out reform proposals related to the Union's long-term future.

There is a need to actively involve citizens and policymakers from all levels of EU governance in debates about the perspectives for European integration.

The involvement of citizens from all over EUrope is an important stepping stone in the process of adapting and improving the Union's governance model. **Change in**

the context of the evolving permacrisis is likely to be radical and will only be possible if EU citizens feel they have a say when it comes to co-determining the Union's future. Policymakers at the European and national level will need citizens' support – but also prodding – to shoulder the responsibility required to successfully adapt to the massive challenges of this day and age. Citizens' buy-in will be essential to ensure that Europeans feel a sense of ownership when it comes to making hard choices and co-determining the future of their continent.¹⁵⁴

In light of the need to enlarge and reform the EU, the following three instruments of citizens' participation could be part of the **EU Citizens' Participation Roadmap**:

- (1) **European Citizens' Reform Panel:** As the strategic geopolitical imperative of enlargement grows and the permacrisis advances – both heavily straining the EU's current constitutional arrangements and means to respond effectively – the pressure to reform the Union's operating system will continue to grow. And if efforts aiming to explore more substantial EU reforms gain more traction, including attempts to reform of Union's governance system, the respective process should be properly prepared.

In this context, a **European Citizens' Reform Panel should be set up to accompany the EU's internal reform process, involving citizens from current and potential future member states.** This Panel should be a collective initiative supported and jointly organised by the European Commission, Parliament, and Council. Should the reform process, at some point in time, lead to a European Convention, citizens from

future EU countries should be among the ‘ambassadors’ from the Panel to be invited to participate in the Convention as observers in order to provide input and/or feedback.¹⁵⁵

The involvement of citizens in a process leading to a substantial internal EU reform would be particularly significant, given that a potential amendment of the EU Treaties will have to be ratified in all member states, which in some countries requires a national referendum.¹⁵⁶ **A more active participation of citizens could help to generate public support and thus counter the danger that the outcome of a future Convention in the context of the ordinary revision procedure might be rejected in a given EU country.** European citizens’ inclusion in a potential EU governance reform process could thus help to foster the perception that results were co-created, which could facilitate public endorsement.

- (2) **European Forum on Enlargement:** The complex discussion about the EU’s expansion to 30+ member states, with all the multiple and sensitive implications of that process both for the Union and the aspiring member states, suggests the organisation of a European Forum on Enlargement. In the spirit of ‘thinking enlarged’, establishing such a Forum would help to **intensify the transnational debate, increase public trust on both sides, and foster knowledge about the benefits, challenges and complexities related to the EU enlargement process.** The main EU institutions should jointly organise this exercise and engage representatives from all EU and aspiring member states, at all levels: citizens, civil society, experts, as well as elected policymakers from the local, regional, national and European levels.¹⁵⁷

Given that progress towards a widening of the EU is in the fundamental interest of the Union and considering that the enlargement process needs to speed up in the coming years, the **decision to initiate a European Forum on Enlargement should be taken as soon as possible within the current politico-institutional cycle.** The basic idea and more concrete suggestions related *inter alia* to the objectives, timetable and choice of topics should reflect the key issues identified in the context of the Comprehensive EU Reform Plan (see EU reform recommendation #1).

- (3) **Future of EUrope Debates: The heads of state and government of the EU27 and aspiring member states should be invited to share their views on the Future of EUrope in the European Parliament** with a special focus on EU enlargement and EU reform, and the links between these processes. To connect these Future of EUrope Debates with the European Citizens’ Reform Panel and the European Forum on Enlargement, citizens participating in the Panel and in the Forum should have the opportunity to share their main concerns and questions with EU leaders ahead of their speeches, so that the latter can reflect them in their thoughts about EUrope’s future.

The participation of citizens and policymakers from the local, regional, national to the trans-national level in the process aimed at enlarging and reforming the EU will not only be critical as a means of answering public calls for more political involvement. It will also be essential to **ensure that Europeans feel a sense of ownership when it comes to making hard choices and co-determining the future of their continent.** This is particularly important in the context of EU enlargement and reform for two reasons. First, it will help to increase trust within and between the current and future EU members. Second, it can help to generate public support, which is necessary given that the ratification of the accession and reform treaties (if applicable) will be subject to national referenda in some countries.

The participation of citizens and policymakers will also be essential to ensure that Europeans feel a sense of ownership when it comes to making hard choices and co-determining the future of their continent.

5. A rendezvous with history

Reflecting “On tyranny”¹⁵⁸ from a historical perspective, Timothy Snyder cautioned against the temptation of thinking that our peaceful, prosperous, rules-based reality cannot decline and crumble. As he argues, “societies can break, democracies can fall, ethics can collapse, and ordinary men can find themselves standing over death pits with guns in their hands. [...] We are no wiser than the Europeans who saw democracy yield to fascism, Nazism, or communism in the twentieth century. Our own advantage is that we might learn from their experience. Now is a good time to do so.”

Indeed, **it is high time for us to abandon the arrogance we display regarding the resilience of our political order and the nonchalance with which we approach the risks that have been piling up for decades.** (Geo-) political and (geo-)economic shocks, the ‘poly-transition’ (green, digital and demographic) and fundamental challenges to the future of liberal democracy are as real and dangerous as they have ever been. The return of Donald Trump to the White House and his “America first” doctrine is no longer an unimaginable circumstance but a clear blow to the Union’s liberal democracy and security in the broadest sense.

This is not a drill. The EU must expect the worst and prepare for it without taboos because its own survival is now at stake.

This is not a drill. The EU must expect the worst and prepare for it without taboos because its own survival is now at stake. Substantially increasing responsibility for Europe’s security, radically reforming the Union’s economy to restore the continent’s competitiveness in a sustainable fashion, and fighting against illiberal, regressive and nativist forces within and outside the EU are herculean tasks that member states can no longer put off or ignore. But the Union and its members would be naive to imagine they can effectively deliver on these jobs without internal EU reform and without the support and inclusion of strategic allies in their neighbourhood.

For everything to stay the same, everything might have to change, including the number of members around the European decision-making table (hence the enlargement imperative) and the Union’s operating system in an enlarged format (hence the reform imperative). **In the permopolycrisis era, Europe should embrace permachange, taking on both enlargement and internal EU reform with courage and ambition.**

To stimulate and contribute to the debate about further EU widening and deepening, this paper analysed nine

potential strategic EU enlargement and EU reform options, arguing in favour of a Gradual Progressive Reform (R2) coupled with either a Speedy Big Bang Enlargement (E1) or a Strategic Regatta (E2) course in which aspiring member states would join the Union in consecutive waves. It also presented a set of concrete recommendations to see these options implemented in practice in the short to medium term.

Make no mistake: there are no silver bullets. The hurdles on the complex and difficult paths towards a larger and reformed Union are very high. While discussing and working on this paper, many doubtful voices in Brussels, EU capitals and the candidate countries tried to pour cold water on our call for a decisive and ambitious Union. Some argue that the EU will not be able to enlarge and reform in the coming years; that the member states and candidates lack the political will and stamina to do so. Others hold that the Union should not even try to widen and deepen but focus instead on what they perceive as other more important priorities on the agenda.

We disagree. **If the EU27 does not respond to the enlargement imperative and the reform imperative, the Union will soon become irrelevant at the European and global level.** Others will decide our future, and citizens will lose their remaining trust in the European integration project. In an extreme but no longer unthinkable scenario, we might have to answer to future generations as to why we were not able to avert a massive global confrontation that started under our watch.

Europeans can still determine their collective future. But, as Gideon Rachman observes, the way to be on the right side of history is either to anticipate events or “to align yourself with the right causes and values – those that the history books will ultimately vindicate.”¹⁵⁹ By naively thinking that history was on their side, many European leaders might have failed to foresee, let alone react to, the dramatic direction in which events are changing our familiar world. Yet, the Union and its members still have the chance to get on the right side of history by doing whatever it takes now to secure a liberal, prosperous and peaceful order on the continent. **History is calling – but will Europe be courageous enough to come to the rendezvous?**

The Union and its members still have the chance to get on the right side of history by doing whatever it takes now to secure a liberal, prosperous and peaceful order on the continent.

Endnotes

- ¹ The term 'EUrope' stands for both the political structure of the EU and the broader geopolitical region of Europe. It encompasses the European Union, the European continent, as well as a potential alternative form of institutional architecture beyond the EU as we know it.
- ² Rehn, Olli (2008), "A stronger Europe through deepening and widening", Speech by the then European Commissioner for Enlargement, Olli Rehn, at the EPP conference on enlargement and consolidation of the European Union, Brussels, 8 April 2008.
- ³ See Zuleeg, Fabian, Emmanouilidis, Janis A., Borges de Castro, Ricardo (2021) "Europe in the age of permacrisis", *EPC Commentary*.
- ⁴ European Commission (2023), "[Enlargement: Commission recommends starting accession negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and candidate status for Georgia](#)", Press Release, 8 November 2023.
- ⁵ See European Western Balkans (2024), "[Hearing of Marta Kos: Enlargement to remain merit-based, some candidates could finish negotiations during the next Commission's term](#)".
- ⁶ See Emmanouilidis, Janis A. and Zuleeg, Fabian (2022), "[Europe's moment of truth: United by adversity?](#)", *EPC Discussion Paper*.
- ⁷ See Emmanouilidis, Janis A. and Zuleeg, Fabian (2025), "[Europe's next watershed – how liberal Europe should react to Trump 2.0](#)", *EPC Discussion Paper*.
- ⁸ See Zuleeg, Fabian, Möller, Almut, Emmanouilidis, Janis A. (2024), "[Confronting the permacrisis: Time for a supra-governmental avantgarde](#)", *EPC Discussion Paper*.
- ⁹ See Emmanouilidis, Janis A. and Stratulat, Corina (2024), "[Participatory democracy at the EU level: How to break the invisible ceiling](#)", *Observatory Report* published in the context of the EU Democracy Reform Observatory, here p.15.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.
- ¹² See European Council (2024), *Strategic Agenda 2024-2029*.
- ¹³ See von der Leyen, Ursula (2024), *Europe's choice – Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029*, Strasbourg, 18 July 2024, p. 30.
- ¹⁴ See Balfour, Rosa and Stratulat, Corina (2023), "Between engagement and cold feet: ten years of the EU in the Western Balkans" in Prifti, Eviola (ed.) (2023), *The European future of the Western Balkans – Thessaloniki @10 (2003-2023)*, EU-ISS Books, p. 23.
- ¹⁵ Every year, the European Commission publishes country reports, offering a detailed assessment of the state of play and progress made by aspiring member states. The 2024 reports are available here: https://commission.europa.eu/news/enlargement-reports-2024-commission-outlines-progress-and-priorities-candidate-countries-2024-10-30_en
- ¹⁶ See Balfour, Rosa and Stratulat, Corina (2015), "[EU member states and enlargement towards the Balkans](#)", *EPC Issue Paper*.
- ¹⁷ The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, announced by the European Commission in November 2023, is a €6 billion fund aimed at helping to accelerate the implementation of EU-related reforms and advance socio-economic convergence between of the Western Balkans and the Union through financial incentives and the gradual accession to the single market ahead of full membership.
- ¹⁸ Inspired by a sport event consisting of boats races, the expression is used to suggest that countries accede to the EU when and if they qualify (i.e. when they have met the membership criteria), rather than together, in groups or waves.
- ¹⁹ See European Commission (2020), *Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans*.
- ²⁰ See Council of the EU (2024), *Sixteenth meeting of the Accession Conference with Montenegro at Ministerial level*.
- ²¹ See, for example, Djolai, Nechev (2018), "[Bilateral disputes conundrum: Accepting the past and finding solutions for the Western Balkans](#)", BIEPAG.
- ²² See, for example, Zweers, Cretti, de Boon, Dafa, Subotić, Muk, Fetahu, Abazi Imeri, Kuhinja, Kujraković (2022), "[The EU as a promoter of democracy or 'stabilitocracy' in the Western Balkans?](#)", Clingendael Institute and the Think for Europe Network (TEN).
- ²³ See Duff, Andrew (2025), "[How to fast-track Ukraine's membership of the European Union](#)", *EPC Commentary*.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ See, for example, European Parliamentary Research Service (2016), "[Ratification of international agreements by EU Member States](#)", *EPRS Briefing*.
- ²⁶ See Zuleeg et al. (2021), *op. cit.*
- ²⁷ See Zuleeg, Fabian (2022), "[A watershed moment in European history: decision time for the EU](#)", *EPC Commentary*.
- ²⁸ See Zuleeg, Fabian (2023), "[Overcoming the European progress illusion](#)", *EPC Commentary*.
- ²⁹ See Zuleeg et al. (2024), *op. cit.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform (2023), *Sailing on high seas: reforming and enlarging the EU for the 21st century*, Paris-Berlin.
- ³² See European Parliament (2023), *Proposals of the European Parliament for the amendment of the Treaties*, P9_TA(2023)0427.
- ³³ Kreilinger, Valentin et al. (2024), "[A new political landscape: Europe after the elections](#)", *SIEPS Brief*.
- ³⁴ See, for example, Maurice, Eric (2024), "[2024 EU election results: Limited change, great challenges, Brussels](#)", *EPC Compendium*.
- ³⁵ See, for example, Jean-Claude Juncker, White Paper Process on EU Reform in 2017: European Commission (2017) presents *White Paper on the future of Europe: Avenues for unity for the EU at 27*, Brussels.
- ³⁶ See von der Leyen, Ursula (2024), *Speech in the European Parliament Plenary Session on the new College of Commissioners and its programme*, here p. 9.
- ³⁷ See the framing paragraph of *Ursula von der Leyen's Mission Letters to her new College of Commissioners*, European Commission (2024), *Mission Letters to Commissioners-designate*, p. 2.
- ³⁸ See, for example: Duff, Andrew, and Garicano, Luis (2024), "A two-tier federal budget for the European Union", *EPC Discussion Paper*; Enrico Letta (2024), *Much more than a Market: Speed, security, solidarity – empowering the Single Market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU citizens*; and Draghi, Mario (2024), *The future of European competitiveness – Part A | A competitiveness strategy for Europe; and The future of European competitiveness – Part B | In-depth analysis and recommendations*, September 2024.
- ³⁹ See European Commission (2024), *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews*, COM(2024) 146 final, 20 March 2024.
- ⁴⁰ For these and other ambitious governance reforms see: Duff, Andrew (2024), "[Keeping the Promise: Reform of governance in the enlarged European Union](#)", *EPC Discussion Paper*, pp. 8-9; European Parliament, *Proposals of the European Parliament for the amendment of the Treaties*, *op. cit.*; The Spinelli Group (2018), "[Manifesto for the Future of Europe: A shared destiny](#)".
- ⁴¹ See European Parliament (2023), *op. cit.*
- ⁴² See Brusis, Martin and Emmanouilidis, Janis A. (eds.) (2002), *Thinking Enlarged. The Accession Countries and the Future of the European Union*, Europa Union Verlag, Bonn.
- ⁴³ See European Council (2024), *op. cit.* and von der Leyen (2024), *op. cit.*
- ⁴⁴ For a more thorough description and analysis of this strategic option, see New Pact for Europe (2013), *Strategic options for Europe's future*.
- ⁴⁵ See MCC (2025), *The Great Reset – An Urgent need for Drastic Reform*.
- ⁴⁶ France24, "[Trump says the EU was formed to 'screw' the United States](#)", 26 February 2025.
- ⁴⁷ See Emmanouilidis and Zuleeg (2025), *op. cit.*

- ⁴⁸ European Union (2024), [Standard Eurobarometer 102 – Autumn 2024 \(Key Findings\)](#).
- ⁴⁹ See Emmanouilidis, Janis A. (2012), “[European’s ambitious muddling through](#)”, *Project Syndicate*, 24 July 2012.
- ⁵⁰ See Emmanouilidis and Stratulat (2024), *op. cit.*
- ⁵¹ European Council (1993), [Conclusions of the Presidency – Copenhagen](#), June 21-22, 1993.
- ⁵² See Zweers, Wouter *et al.* (2022), [The EU as a promoter of democracy or ‘stabilitocracy’ in the Western Balkans?](#), Clingendael.
- ⁵³ See Stratulat, Corina, Kmezić, Marko, Cvijic, Srdjan, Vurmo, Gjergji, Bonomi, Matteo, Nechev, Zoran, Wunsch, Natasha, and Lavrič, Miran (2021), [Escaping the Transactional Trap: The way forward for EU enlargement](#), BiEPAG.
- ⁵⁴ See Stratulat, Corina (2021), “[EU enlargement to the Western Balkans – Three observations](#)”, *EPC Commentary*.
- ⁵⁵ See Mihajlović, Milena, Blockmans, Steven, Subotić, Strahinja, Emerson, Michael (2023), [Template 2.0 for staged accession to the EU](#), European Policy Centre and CEPS.
- ⁵⁶ See Blockmans, Steven and Emerson, Michael (2023), [Sectoral policy integration in advance of accession – an alternative or complement to the Staged Accession model?](#), European Policy Centre and CEPS.
- ⁵⁷ See Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform (2023), [Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century](#), Paris-Berlin.
- ⁵⁸ As this paper goes to print, Montenegro has opened all the 33 chapters of the negotiations and provisionally closed six of them: 25 Science and research (2012), 26 Education and culture (2013), 30 External relations (2017), and 7 Intellectual property law, 10 Information society and media, and 20 Enterprise and industrial policy (2024).
- ⁵⁹ See Duff, “How to fast-track Ukraine’s membership of the European Union”, *op.cit.*
- ⁶⁰ Vachudova, Milada Anna and Spendzharova, Aneta (2012), [The EU’s Cooperation and Verification Mechanism: Fighting Corruption in Bulgaria and Romania after EU Accession](#), Sieps – Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies.
- ⁶¹ All EU aspiring member states (i.e. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Ukraine) are transitional or hybrid regimes, struggling with corruption and other governance issues, and hence falling short to the standards of a consolidated or semi-consolidated democracy according to the Freedom House. Data available here: <https://freedomhouse.org/explore-the-map?type=all&year=2025>
- ⁶² Concrete measures to ensure this is the introduction of deadlines for the Commission and European Court of Justice for infringement procedures related to the rule of law, and further emphasis on the implementation and follow up of infringement outcomes. See Bárd *et al.* (2024), “Treaty changes for the better protection of EU values in the Member States”, *European Law Journal*, p. 11.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ⁶⁶ See Report of the Franco-German Working Group, [Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century](#), *op.cit*
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁸ Balfour, Rosa and Basic, Dijana (2010), [A bridge over troubled borders: Europeanising the Balkans](#)”, *EPC Policy Brief*, European Policy Centre.
- ⁶⁹ Balfour, Rosa and Stratulat, Corina (2012), [The enlargement of the European Union](#)”, *EPC Discussion Paper*.
- ⁷⁰ See Peaceful Change initiative (2022), [Citizens must not be held hostage by the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue](#).
- ⁷¹ López Domènech, Berta (2023), [Dayton for Brussels: Reviving Bosnia’s constitutional reform](#)”, *EPC Discussion Paper*.
- ⁷² See [Speech by President Charles Michel at the Bled Strategic Forum](#)”, 28 August 2023.
- ⁷³ See for example Fouéré, Erwan (2023). [EU enlargement and the resolution of bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans](#), CEPS.
- ⁷⁴ See for example Petruseva, Ana (2024), [Balkan Support for EU Accession High, Except in Serbia – Survey](#), Balkan Insight.
- ⁷⁵ See for example Fouda, Malek (2025), [Tens of thousands take to the streets of Tbilisi in anti-government protests on New Year’s Eve](#), Euronews.
- ⁷⁶ See, for example [“Balkan Barometer 2024 Public Opinion”](#), Regional Cooperation Council
- ⁷⁷ See López Domènech, “Leaving Dayton for Brussels: Reviving Bosnia’s constitutional reform”, *op.cit.*
- ⁷⁸ See European Commission (2022), [DG NEAR Guidelines for EU Support to Civil Society in the Enlargement Region 2021-2027](#).
- ⁷⁹ [“A larger and reformed European Union #30+: getting ready for EU enlargement”](#), *FNF Position Paper*.
- ⁸⁰ See Reljic, Dusan (2023), [European Union and its enlargement policy - European Purgatory in Four Circles](#), BiEPAG.
- ⁸¹ See European Commission (2024), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews](#), COM(2024) 146 final, 20 March 2024.
- ⁸² See [“European Council meeting \(27 June 2024\) – Conclusions”](#), EUCO 15/24, Brussels, 27 June 2024.
- ⁸³ See Council of the European Union (2024), [Belgian Presidency Progress Report on the Future of Europe](#), 10411/24, 10 June 2024.
- ⁸⁴ See von der Leyen, [Europe’s Choice](#), *op.cit.*; here p. 30.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.3.
- ⁸⁶ For more on the divisions among the EU27 and between EU institutions regarding future internal EU reforms and the reasons behind them see: Emmanouilidis and Stratulat, “Participatory democracy at the EU level”, *op.cit.*
- ⁸⁷ See European Parliament, [Proposals of the European Parliament for the amendment of the Treaties](#), *op.cit.*
- ⁸⁸ See Duff, Andrew (2024), [“Keeping the Promise: Reform of governance in the enlarged European Union”](#). *EPC Discussion Paper*; pp. 8-9.
- ⁸⁹ See Sapala, Magdalena (2021), [Cohesion, resilience and values – Heading 2 of the 2021-2027 MFF](#)”, *EPRS Briefing*.
- ⁹⁰ See Duff (2024), “Keeping the Promise”, *op.cit.*, p. 8.
- ⁹¹ See also Zuleeg, Möller, Emmanouilidis, “Confronting the permacrisis”, *op.cit.*
- ⁹² For more about a potential intergovernmental fund see: Tamma, Paola, Foy, Henry, Varvitsioti, Eleni, and Rathboner, John Paul (2024), [“Europe races to set up €500bn defence fund”](#), *Financial Times*, 5 December 2024.
- ⁹³ European Council, [Strategic Agenda 2024-2029](#); *op.cit.*
- ⁹⁴ For more on the future of Europe’s economic security see: Riekeles, Georg and Świeboda, Paweł (2024), [“Europe’s make-or-break moment: Putting economic security at the heart of the EU’s 2024-2029 strategic agenda”](#), *EPC Framing Paper*.
- ⁹⁵ Draghi, Mario (2024), [The future of European competitiveness – Part A | A competitiveness strategy for Europe; and The future of European competitiveness – Part B | In-depth analysis and recommendations](#).
- ⁹⁶ Letta, Enrico (2024), [Much more than a market – Speed, security, solidarity](#).
- ⁹⁷ Niinistö, Sauli (2024), [Safer together – strengthening Europe’s civilian and military preparedness and readiness](#).
- ⁹⁸ See European Commission (2025), [A Competitiveness Compass for the EU](#), COM(2025) 30 final.
- ⁹⁹ For an analysis of the Commission’s White Paper on Defence see Chihaiia, Mihai, Martisiute, Maria, Majcin, Juraj, Taylor, Paul, and Kremidas-Courtney, Chris (2025), [“The EU’s rearmament blueprint hinges on uncertain national borrowing”](#), *EPC Commentary*.
- ¹⁰⁰ European Commission (2025), [European defence readiness 2030](#), JOIN2025 120(final).
- ¹⁰¹ The list of like-minded European, enlargement and neighbouring countries includes: Albania, Iceland, Montenegro, the Republic of Moldova, North Macedonia, and Switzerland. In addition, the White Paper also explicitly mentions the following additional partner countries in Europe and beyond: Canada, India, Japan, Norway, Republic of Korea, Türkiye, and the United Kingdom.
- ¹⁰² See Council of the European Union, [Belgian Presidency Progress Report on the Future of Europe](#), *op.cit.*
- ¹⁰³ See [European Council conclusions](#), EUCO 20/23, CO EUR 16 CONCL 6, December 2023. See also European Council, [Granada Declaration](#), 6 October 2023, 706/23.
- ¹⁰⁴ See Commission (2024), [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews](#). For a more fundamental understanding related to the potential design of different forms of ‘gradual integration’ below (before full EU membership see also

- the following publications: Mihajlović, Milena, Blockman, Stevan, Subotić, Strahinja, Emerson, Michael (2023), *op.cit.*; Duff, Andrew (2024), [“Going back: What Britain should do to join the European Union”](#), *EPC Discussion Paper.*; and Emmanouilidis, Janis A. (2008), [“Alternatives between full membership and non-membership – Fata Morgana or Silver Bullet?”](#), ELIAMEP.
- ¹⁰⁵ See Council of the European Union, *Belgian Presidency Progress Report on the Future of Europe*, *op.cit.*, p. 4.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6. Besides the potential use of the general passerelle clause, the Belgian Presidency Report also mentions the possibility to explore the increased use of “constructive abstention” in the area of CFSP. As a general rule, all CFSP decisions are adopted unanimously. However, in certain cases, an EU country can choose to abstain from voting on a particular action without blocking it. Under Article 31 TEU, the country that constructively abstains may qualify its abstention by making a formal declaration. In that case, it shall not be obliged to apply this decision but shall accept that the decision commits the EU.
- ¹⁰⁸ The fact that the Belgian Presidency Report also states that attempts aiming to introduce QMV in the Council should be accompanied by a mechanism “to preserve vital interests” is another indication of how worried member states are when it comes a potential loss of veto rights in the Council.
- ¹⁰⁹ Another possible avenue discussed among the EU27 was to frame the use of veto rights through a “political commitment” to limit recourse to their veto rights only for “vital and stated reasons of national policy” directly related to the specific decisions, in line with the principle of sincere cooperation. The possible avenue for member states to politically commit to explain their vote when they use their veto right was also explored. See *ibid.*
- ¹¹⁰ On a reform of “EU values”, the Belgian Presidency Report calls for a reflection on how to “further strengthen existing EU tools and processes” to ensure the respect and protection of the rule of law and fundamental values across the EU.
- ¹¹¹ On a reform of EU policies, the Belgian Presidency Report states that there is a need to further “identify, define, elaborate, and review EU policies”, including *inter alia* the Single Market, competitiveness and related key policies, green and digital transition, Common Agricultural Policy, Cohesion policy, area of Freedom, Security and Justice and the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Reflections should be substantiated with data, in particular in the context of the Commission’s upcoming in-depth policy reviews expected in 2025. Next to the impact by enlargement, the policy priorities identified in the Strategic Agenda of the European Council should also be taken into account.
- ¹¹² Regarding a potential reform of the EU budget, the Belgian Presidency Report reiterates the Commission’s Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews from March 2024 by stating that enlargement will be one of the topics factored in the upcoming Commission proposal for the next MFF (2028-2035) expected in July 2025. Taking into account the next MFF discussions, the EU27 should scrutinize how the future EU budget should/could evolve, including through the possible reform of the own resources system.
- ¹¹³ See European Parliament, *Proposals of the European Parliament for the amendment of the Treaties*, *op.cit.*
- ¹¹⁴ See Conference on the Future of Europe (2022), [“Report on the Final Outcome”](#), 9 May 2022.
- ¹¹⁵ See Report of the Franco-German Working Group, *Sailing on high seas: reforming and enlarging the EU for the 21st century*, *op.cit.*
- ¹¹⁶ See Van Rompuy, Herman and Laffan, Brigid (2022), [“Adding Ambition to Europe’s Unity”](#), *Project Syndicate*, 15 June 2022.
- ¹¹⁷ See Duff, Andrew (2023), [“Raising the stakes on constitutional reform: The European Parliament triggers treaty change”](#), *EPC Discussion Paper*. Andrew Duff calls for a reflection group to prepare a next European Convention. The group should stimulate constitutional proposals from the Commission, the European Court of Justice and the European Central Bank. According to Duff the group could suggest a mandate and timetable for the Convention in which the European Parliament would be bound to play a leading role.
- ¹¹⁸ Stratulat, Corina (2021), [“Forging a new democratic frontier”](#), *Input Paper to the EPC Annual Conference: “Is Europe still in the global race?”*, European Policy Centre.
- ¹¹⁹ For a more thorough analysis of the reform hesitations of the EU27 see Emmanouilidis and Stratulat, “Participatory democracy at the EU level”, *op. cit.*
- ¹²⁰ See Bård *et al.*, [“Treaty changes for the better protection of EU values in the Member States”](#), *op. cit.*
- ¹²¹ For more concrete proposals related to points (i)-(vii) see also: Cloos, Jim and Merritt, Giles (2024), [“Streamlining the EU: better governance without treaty change”](#), *European Council Experts’ Debrief*.
- ¹²² For more details regarding points (viii) and (ix) see: Zuleeg, Fabian and Emmanouilidis, Janis A. (2024), [“Eight structural innovations for the EU’s next politico-institutional cycle”](#), *EPC Discussion Paper*.
- ¹²³ For more concrete proposals related to point (x) see: Emmanouilidis and Stratulat, “Participatory democracy at the EU level”, *op. cit.*; Demidov, Andrey, Greubel, Johannes, and Petit, Perle (2023), [“Assessing the European Citizens’ Panels: greater ambition needed”](#), *Observatory Report.*; and Hierlemann, Dominik, Roch, Stefan, Butcher, Paul, Emmanouilidis, Janis A., and Stratulat, Corina (2022), [“Under construction: Citizen participation in the European Union”](#), Verlag Bertelsmann Stiftung.
- ¹²⁴ The Lisbon Treaties includes the possibility to reduce the size of the Commission. Article 17(5) states that from 1 November 2014, the Commission “shall consist of a number of members, including its President and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, corresponding to two thirds of the number of Member States, unless the European Council, acting unanimously, decides to alter this number”. However, in practice the size of the Commission has not been reduced, given that in 2009, the European Council decided that the Commission would continue to consist of a number of members equal to the number of member states.
- ¹²⁵ See also [“Passerelle clauses”](#), EUR-Lex.
- ¹²⁶ See also Kotanidis, Silvia (2022), [“How the EU Treaties are modified”](#), *EPRS Briefing*.
- ¹²⁷ Regarding the amendment of Article 136 TFEU, see de Witte, Bruno (2011), [“The European Treaty Amendment for the creation of a Financial Stability Mechanism”](#), *European Policy Analysis, SIEPS*.
- ¹²⁸ For a detailed description of the ‘flexibility clause’ see European Commission (2019), [“The role of the ‘flexibility clause’: Article 352”](#).
- ¹²⁹ See Duff (2024), “Keeping the promise”, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- ¹³⁰ Bård *et al.* (2024), [“Treaty changes for the better protection of EU values in the Member States”](#), *op. cit.*
- ¹³¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ¹³³ See Report of the Franco-German Working Group, *Sailing on high seas: Reforming and enlarging the EU for the 21st Century*, *op. cit.*
- ¹³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹³⁶ See Duff (2024), “Keeping the promise”, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
- ¹³⁷ See Report of the Franco-German Working Group, *Sailing on high seas: Reforming and enlarging the EU for the 21st century*, *op. cit.*, here p. 22.
- ¹³⁸ For a list of core strategic issues and questions where EU member states differ see: Emmanouilidis and Zuleeg, “Eight structural innovations for the EU’s next politico-institutional cycle”, *op. cit.*, here p. 11.
- ¹³⁹ See Emmanouilidis and Zuleeg, “Eight structural innovations for the EU’s next politico-institutional cycle”, *op. cit.*, here p. 10.
- ¹⁴⁰ See Piris, Jean-Claude (2025), [“The resistible decline of the EU: Towards unconventional forms of cooperation”](#), *EPC Discussion Paper*.
- ¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- ¹⁴² See Emmanouilidis, Janis A. (2008), [“Conceptualizing a differentiated Europe”](#), *ELIAMEP Policy Paper*, No. 10, here pp. 14-18.
- ¹⁴³ For a detailed description of a “supra-governmental avantgarde” see Zuleeg, Möller, Emmanouilidis, “Confronting the permacrisis”, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁴⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 8.
- ¹⁴⁵ See *ibid.*
- ¹⁴⁶ See Zuleeg, Fabian (2024), [“Calm after the storm? A Trump-imposed ceasefire means doing much more to protect Ukraine and Europe”](#), *EPC Commentary*.

- ¹⁴⁷ The collective defence spending of EU countries would remain insufficient even if the EU27 would agree on one element included in the “ReArm Europe” proposal of the von der Leyen Commission (March 2025), which proposes the introduction of a new instrument providing €150bn of loans to member states for defence investment. See also: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/sv/statement_25_673/STATEMENT_25_673_EN.pdf
- ¹⁴⁸ See European Commission (2025), *European Defence Readiness 2030*, *op. cit.*, here p. 17.
- ¹⁴⁹ The proposal included in the Commission’s White Paper on Defence stipulates that SAFE shall support the European defence industry through common procurements involving at least two countries. One should be a member state and the other may be another member state, a member of the European Free Trade Area or the European Economic Area, or Ukraine.
- ¹⁵⁰ See Taylor, Paul, Kremidas-Courtney, Chris, Martisiute, Maria, and Chihai, Mihai Sebastian (2025), “[Quick march! Ten steps for a European defence surge](#)”, *EPC Policy Brief*, here p. 5.
- ¹⁵¹ See Emmanouilidis, “Conceptualizing a differentiated Europe”, *op. cit.*, here p. 28.
- ¹⁵² See also Emmanouilidis, Möller, Zuleeg (2024), “Overcoming a hollow & illusory unity – Preparing EUrope for Trump”, *op. cit.*; and Emmanouilidis and Zuleeg, “*Europe’s next watershed*”, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁵³ See Brusis and Emmanouilidis, *Thinking Enlarged*, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁵⁴ See Emmanouilidis and Stratulat, “Participatory democracy at the EU level”, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁵⁵ For a more detailed account of these and other proposals see: Emmanouilidis, Janis A. (2022), “The future is now – What next after the Conference on the Future of Europe?”, in ELIAMEP and Hanns Seidel Foundation (eds.), [Taking stock, moving forward: Reflections following the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), pp. 4-10; and Emmanouilidis, Janis A. *et al.* (2023), “[Conference on the Future of Europe: What worked, what now, what next?](#)”, *Observatory Report*.
- ¹⁵⁶ Article 48(4) TEU.
- ¹⁵⁷ See also Hierlemann, Dominik, Demidov, Andrey and Roch, Stefan (2024), “[The EU’s participatory enlargement](#)”, Bertelsmann Stiftung Policy Brief 1/2024.
- ¹⁵⁸ See Snyder, Timothy (2017), *On tyranny: twenty lessons from the twentieth century*, Penguin Random House, here pp. 10-13.
- ¹⁵⁹ See Rachman, Gideon (2016), “[Boris Johnson has failed the Churchill test](#)”, Opinion in the *Financial Times*, 23 February.

This paper seeks to inspire, promote and link the debates on how to widen and deepen European integration in the coming years. Starting from the assumption that enlargement and internal EU reform are normative imperatives, it explores potential avenues to advance both processes (strategic options), identifies the most suitable (combinations of) strategic options, and presents 12 concrete recommendations on how to implement enlargement and internal EU reform in practice in the years ahead.

This paper is published in the context of the EPC's Democracy Reform Observatory, which aims to foster the discussion on the overall future of the European integration process.

MISSION STATEMENT

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