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Challenge accepted? EU Enlargement non-papers provide mixed picture of EU integration commitment



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Introduction

EU enlargement is again in full swing. On June 15, the Council took the long-anticipated decision to open the fundamentals cluster for Moldova and Ukraine, marking the actual start of their accession negotiations. Montenegro closed yet another 2 negotiation chapters on the same day, getting ever closer to its objective to finalise negotiations by the end of 2026.

Debates on how to facilitate enlargement on the EU side have equally received a boost in recent weeks. For years, these discussions were largely

driven by the expert community, advocating ideas such as the often-cited staged integration proposal.¹ Now, the European Commission and Member States are taking centre stage in the debate. In February, the Commission floated a reversed integration model for Ukraine: membership first, integration later. As Member

1 Emerson, Lazarevic, Blockmans and Subotic, '[A Template for Staged Accession to the EU](#)', Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS) and European Policy Center Belgrade (CEP), October 1, 2021.

States rejected the idea quite firmly, enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos challenged capitals to put forward their own ideas.² Challenge accepted, so must have thought Germany, France and the Benelux countries, producing various non-papers. This brief assesses their proposals, asking whether they can genuinely move enlargement – and the EU itself – forward.

The French-German non-paper in the spirit of European integration

In late May, Germany's Friedrich Merz rather unexpectedly floated an associated membership model for Ukraine. But lacking advance coordination with other Member States, it caught most by surprise. Even Ukraine itself, fearing associated status would render full membership more difficult to obtain, rejected the proposal.³ Knowing that positive impetus was still needed for the early June EU-Western Balkans (WB) summit in Tivat, Germany and France then teamed up for a more thought-out non-paper on accession innovation, dubbed "A New Momentum for Enlargement".⁴

Its potential for bringing new momentum is promising. The French-German (non-)paper gives substance to the idea of gradual political and sectoral integration during the accession process. Over the past year, EU officials have cited abolishing roaming charges and candidates joining the Single European Payment Area as key examples of gradual integration up to the point of exhaustion.⁵ As such, the non-paper's proposals for new tangible gradual integration steps have arrived none too soon. They include political observer status in EU Council meetings,

deeper cooperation on security and defence, and a range of other sectoral initiatives that offer concrete ways to move forward. Overall, the paper reflects a genuine effort to advance the actual European integration between Member States and candidate countries, which could render more effective cooperation in a time Europe faces significant geopolitical challenges.

The Benelux-FR-GER non-paper – risk management over integration spirit

Then came another non-paper with a different focus and tone. Prepared by the Benelux countries together with Germany and France, the non-paper "Towards a catalogue of options for future accession treaties" sets out ideas for the next generation of accession treaties, especially on safeguard clauses and transition periods.⁶ The paper recognises that the process has entered a new phase, with Montenegro leading the field and the prospect of a new accession closer than at any point since Croatia joined in 2013. After such a long pause, updated accession treaties are indeed necessary, meaning Member States do well to consider what they should look like.

Yet, the spirit of European integration is far less visible in this document. Strong safeguard clauses, particularly on the rule of law, are necessary to protect the Union's functioning. Yet extending transition periods, limiting voting rights for new members, and further delaying full financial integration do not necessarily make the accession offer more attractive. Nor is it clear that such steps would be effective.

Take labour mobility. The paper suggests examining whether restrictions on labour market access could be extended beyond the current maximum of seven years. But labour migration is already happening today, often in unregulated ways and therefore, with adverse effects in both

2 Politico, 'EU enlargement chief calls on countries to find a way for new members to join', March 24, 2026.

3 Reuters, 'Exclusive: Ukraine's Zelenskyy says proposal of associate EU membership 'unfair'', May 23, 2026.

4 European Western Balkans, 'Franco-German non-paper call for new approach to EU enlargement', June 05, 2026.

5 Think tanks have floated broader ideas for gradual integration. See for an analysis on gradual sectoral integration: Camille van Hees, Saskia Hollander and Robin Neumann, 'Gradual integration of candidate countries into the European Union: Pushing the impossible, delaying the inevitable?' *Clingendael Report*, February 20, 2025.

6 Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 'Non-paper - catalogue of options for accession treaties', June 9, 2026.

destination countries and countries of origin.⁷ If gradual integration before accession is the guiding principle, the more sensible approach would be a proactive joint labour mobility policy between Member States and candidate countries. Such a policy could support circular and sustainable migration models that benefit economic development on both sides while creating better opportunities for managing risks related to housing, healthcare and education of migrant workers.⁸ On the contrary, waiting until countries become members and then imposing long-term barriers will have the opposite effect, or in any case not contribute to boosting the competitiveness of the EU internal market that Mario Draghi and others are rightfully calling for.⁹

A more fundamental issue is also at play. The Benelux-German-French paper proposes placing greater emphasis on the EU's principle of sincere cooperation (Article 4(3) TEU) in accession treaties, urging future members to behave constructively once they join. Yet the main problems with EU decision-making today are not caused by candidate countries. They stem from the behaviour of current members. Hungary has for years played a highly problematic role across multiple policy areas while communicating Council discussions directly to the Kremlin. Bulgaria and Greece blocked North Macedonia's accession path for reasons that had little to do with EU policies. The Commission has launched infringement proceedings against numerous Member States for failing to transpose the directive criminalising violations of EU sanctions. A wide range of contentious (foreign) policy issues has undermined the spirit of European integration in the Council rather

than strengthened it. As such, the EU could rather strengthen safeguards and enforcement mechanisms on Article 4(3) for all Member States than only reminding new members of the article in accession treaties.

From risk management to tackling the EU's actual issues

Many of the EU's problems today are internal and exist regardless of whether new countries will join the EU. They therefore require internal solutions. Enter the broader EU reform debate, which gained momentum after 2022 but now appears largely stalled. The Commission was expected to publish policy reviews in key areas in late 2025 but still has not done so. Member States have not moved significantly closer to agreement on issues such as qualified majority voting in foreign policy or reform of the budget. And in the enlargement debate itself, many governments seem more willing to discuss limiting the rights of future members than giving up their own vetoes in technical parts of the accession process. That is hardly a convincing example of sincere cooperation.

EU enlargement makes reform of the EU paramount. Interestingly, accession treaties also provide a rare opportunity to make at least small modifications to the EU treaties on issues long overdue. Yet, even regardless of enlargement, internal reform must accelerate if the Union is to function more effectively, act more decisively on the global stage, and deliver better results for its citizens. Without such steps, populist forces will continue to feed on frustration with the EU's performance, which paradoxically further undermines the EU capacity to tackle joint challenges.

Enlargement discussions in Brussels and national capitals are gaining momentum. The two non-papers discussed above illustrate views of EU Member States as Montenegro pushes forward in the negotiations and Ukraine and Moldova start moving and could do so swiftly. Some of the proposals could meaningfully improve the accession process and actual European integration, and thereby, Europe's ability to

7 See: IMF, '[Labor Markets, Migration and EU Integration in the Western Balkans](#)', IMF Working papers, October 31, 2025.

8 Camille van Hees, Ana Milinković, Wouter Zweers & Strahinja Subotić, '[Labour Migration and EU Enlargement: Reconciling Dutch and Western Balkan Priorities](#)', *Clingendael and CEP policy brief*, March 13, 2025.

9 See chapter 4 'Gradual accession to EU labour markets' in Camille van Hees, Saskia Hollander and Robin Neumann, '[Gradual integration of candidate countries into the European Union: Pushing the impossible, delaying the inevitable?](#)' *Clingendael Report*, February 20, 2025.







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navigate pressing global geopolitical challenges. Others may lead to watered-down membership and fall short of a longer-term integration vision for the EU at large. Two crucial elements are missing in the debates altogether: a serious push on EU reform and stronger dynamics in the Council to respect and boost sincere cooperation. Let's hope that future non-papers will pick up on that challenge.

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