

CONCLUSIONS



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The analyses presented in Part IV of this volume converge on a single, overarching proposition: the future of EU enlargement is inseparable from the future of the EU itself. Enlargement is no longer merely a policy area or an external instrument. It is an existential test of the EU's constitutional architecture, decision-making capabilities, value-based identity and political legitimacy. It reveals the kind of polity the EU is, and the kind it may plausibly become.

While Parts I to III traced the historical evolution of EU enlargements, assessed the integration success of past waves and examined the preparedness of current applicants, Part IV has brought into focus a deeper structural question: What legal, institutional and conceptual adjustments are needed to ensure that enlargement strengthens – rather than strains – the EU? Since enlargement and integration have become inseparable variables in the EU's political equation, the chapters in this Part collectively articulate a structural vision of an EU capable of acting, deciding, absorbing and stabilising in a rapidly changing geopolitical environment.

The following concluding reflections draw out the core analytical insights, identify the tensions and complementarities among them and sketch the implications not only for the next enlargement round, but for the EU's future as a constitutional entity.

One of the most fundamental realisations evolving from this Part is that enlargement has matured into an internal constitutional problem, not merely an exercise of external governance. As Alexander Graser's contribution demonstrates, the European Union today is characterised by a series of entrenched features: its sedimented intergovernmentalism, its dense distribution of veto rights, its complex semi-federal layering of competences, its extreme difficulty in formal amendments and its reliance on judicial constitutionalisation rather than political constitutional revision. These attributes make the EU at once highly legalised and yet politically brittle. The prospect of enlargement intensifies this duality. Every new Member State becomes

Michal Petr (2026) 'Conclusions'. In: Michal Petr (ed.) *EU Enlargement and Successful Integration: Is There a Way?* Volume I., pp. 613–617. Miskolc–Budapest, Central European Academic Publishing.



https://doi.org/10.54237/profnet.2026.mpeesitw_IV.7

another node in the web of unanimity-based decisions that still govern crucial policy areas like foreign policy, taxation, treaty reform and accession itself. In a constitutional order where amendment requires the unanimous consent of potentially thirty-plus national parliaments, and sometimes referenda, adding new members amplifies the difficulty of political recalibration. At the same time, the EU's reliance on judicial integration and variable geometry generates a form of constitutional plasticity that is not always matched by equivalent political flexibility.

Graser introduced an incremental reform agenda, including loosening veto thresholds in selected domains, empowering parliamentary initiative and political responsibility, developing a limited but meaningful fiscal capacity, consolidating variable geometries, and rephrasing the 'ever closer union' mandate. Yet even though this may seem as a restrained articulation of minimum structural adjustments necessary to ensure the future effective functioning of the EU and specifically, that future enlargements are coherent with the EU's operability, some of the proposals remain controversial. The issue of qualified majority voting, discussed in detail by Bohinc, serves as an example. There is a strong position in favour in many Member States, justified by the EU's effectiveness, meeting equally strong opposition in others, justified by fear of further eroding their sovereignty within the block. The message is nonetheless clear: without some degree of constitutional reforms, the EU's absorptive capacity will remain politically constrained even when candidates fulfil all the technical criteria.

In any event, any technical changes must be based on fundamental principles, defining EU integration. While the EU has long relied on accession conditionalities to shape candidate behaviour, Matteo Gnes's chapter demonstrates that conditionality has always been an incomplete tool unless embedded within the substantive principles that define the EU's legal order. The Copenhagen criteria brought transparency to the accession process. Yet, as Gnes explains, they did not by themselves generate the political confidence, mutual trust or social acceptance required among the existing Member States. The 2004 enlargement is illustrative. Legally, it was meticulously prepared. Politically, it triggered anxieties over social dumping, competitive deregulation and the potential erosion of national welfare systems. These fears were not fundamentally about the applicants' formal compliance with the *acquis*; they concerned whether existing Member States perceived the newcomers as partners capable of upholding mutual recognition, solidarity, and the rule of law, the three principles that, in Gnes's analysis, form the normative backbone of the integration project. The core implication is straightforward but far-reaching: future enlargements cannot rely solely on technical conditionalities; they must be anchored in principles that sustain trust inside the EU.

If decision-making reforms address the EU's internal readiness for enlargement, Lénárd Sándor's contribution addresses the architecture of accession itself. Gradual integration, as Sándor conceptualises it, responds to two persistent challenges. On the one hand, the extremely long time-horizon of accession negotiations, which deprives candidates of tangible benefits and weakens reform incentives, and the EU's

need to maintain leverage in the ‘fundamentals’ (judicial independence, anti-corruption, public administration and minority protection), on the other. The solution is a benchmarked, reversible, merit-based sequencing of integration steps. Candidates can be gradually integrated into elements of the internal market, sectoral programmes, infrastructure networks and regulatory domains before full accession, provided they meet specific criteria. Funding follows performance; progress brings new rights; backsliding triggers reversals. It transforms the accession process from a distant promise into a dynamic cycle of reform and reward, while ensuring that the value of full membership remains distinctive and worth striving for.

Still, the conditions for full membership might be too burdensome for some candidates, popular support for structural reforms may be low and the willingness of some Member States to actually accept some candidates (their ‘trust’ in them) may be insufficient. György Marinkás’s chapter highlights a reality that EU policymakers rarely acknowledge explicitly: not all candidate countries will become full members in the foreseeable future, whether because of unresolved sovereignty disputes, acute geopolitical exposure, structural governance weaknesses or fundamental value misalignments. In these cases, the EU must avoid two dangers: false reassurance, where membership is promised but politically unachievable, leading to disillusionment and instability; and permanent second-tier status, which undermines both the candidates’ agency and the EU’s normative consistency.

The appropriate solution, as Marinkás argues, lies in clear, standardised and upward-mobile forms of differentiated association: deep and comprehensive trade arrangements, regulatory alignment through the European Economic Area, participation in specific EU programmes and conditional integration into selected policy areas. Such arrangements must be ambitious enough to generate stability and convergence, but principled enough to protect the EU’s identity and values.

Beyond Marinkás’ contribution, but stemming from the book as a whole, lies another alternative, the re-definition of the membership itself that would provide for more diversity. Due to its complexity, this topic goes far beyond the scope of this book. It will, however, arguably become one of the key topics of discussion concerning the reforms of EU’s architecture.

Taken together, the contributions of Part IV present a comprehensive, multi-layered blueprint for a future EU ready to pursue a successful enlargement strategy. Thus, in order for the enlargement process to be successful, the following points need to be taken into account.

First, the EU is based on mutual trust. It is perhaps currently waning within the EU itself, and it is definitely not strong enough *vis-à-vis* (most of) the candidates. As a result, the accession process cannot be shock-accelerated. The candidates need years of deep structural reforms. Some form of post-accession verification will also most probably need to be introduced, potentially for a very long time.

Consequently, there will necessarily be differences in the ‘level’ of membership. Acknowledging this might enable a more fundamental discussion about the meaning of membership. The unity of the EU might not be compromised by allowing for more

diversity, enabling the Member States to choose ‘their’ level of depth of integration, while still being synchronised by the core principles of integration.

Second, the ‘gradual integration’ methodology is arguably the only viable strategy for the future. For too long have the accession negotiations been open-ended without bringing tangible benefits to successful candidates. The parameters of the process may be re-adjusted, but the general direction is correct.

Third, solidarity, another fundamental principle of EU integration, must already be in place before the accession. The candidates deserve far-reaching assistance, be it technical, personal or financial. This, again, must be accompanied with mutual trust. Insisting on the fulfilment of the rule-of-law requirements is therefore unavoidable. Implementing them may be difficult due to cultural and value-based differences and, as repeatedly observed, takes time. This makes the principles of solidarity, trust and rule of law mutually dependent.

Fourth, EU membership is not a status symbol. There are other meaningful forms of cooperation which may be more appropriate for some candidates, if the accession conditions are too burdensome or when the mutual trust is not sufficiently high. With the current candidates, the EU might have found its boundaries. It does not mean that all the candidates must necessarily become Member States.

And finally, any future enlargement seems to be impossible without deeper changes in the EU’s architecture. More differentiation, as argued above, should be one of them.

In conclusion, three overarching insights emerge. First, the enlargement has always transformed not only the candidates but also the EU itself. From the very first round in 1973 to the post-Cold War expansion of 2004–2007–2013, enlargements have consistently engineered institutional, procedural and doctrinal change. The EU is a polity shaped by widening as much as by deepening. Future enlargements will be no different. But the pace and scale of geopolitical pressures make the stakes higher today than ever.

Second, successful integration requires more than compliance. Past enlargements have shown that technical transposition of the *acquis* does not guarantee functional convergence or political trust. Integration succeeds only when it is built on mutual confidence, shared responsibility and respect for common constitutional standards. And third, the EU’s identity is contested but cohesive. The EU is neither a classical federation nor a mere international organisation. It is a constitutional order with plural sovereignties, layered competences and a unique blend of legal supranationalism and political intergovernmentalism. Enlargement forces the EU to clarify precisely what it is; and what it is not. The future of the EU will depend on its ability to find a model of membership and association that is principled, flexible and democratically legitimate.

Europe’s geopolitical environment has shifted dramatically. The war in Ukraine, the growing strategic competition with China, the instability in the Western Balkans and the fragility of global governance create new pressures on the EU to stabilise its neighbourhood and protect its values. Enlargement is a tool of that strategy.

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But it may be effective only if the EU itself is structurally capable of absorbing new members. Without reform, enlargement risks paralysis. Without enlargement, the EU risks irrelevance and insecurity. The challenge, then, is not to choose between deepening and widening, but to design an institutional order that can sustain both.

The analyses in this book suggest that this is possible. It will require political courage, institutional creativity and renewed public engagement. It will require an EU that is confident in its values, realistic about its diversity and committed to a shared European future. In that sense, enlargement is not only an accession process. It is a constitutional project, a political commitment and ultimately a statement of what the EU aspires to be.

