

INTRODUCTION



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The enlargement of the European Union (EU) stands as one of the most ambitious and far-reaching political, legal, and socio-economic projects undertaken in the modern history of European integration. From its origins in the post-war vision of peaceful cooperation, the EU has progressively evolved through successive rounds of accession, each of which has fundamentally reshaped not only the candidate countries but also the institutional, constitutional and material foundations of the EU itself. Enlargement today represents a comprehensive transformation – one that is simultaneously legal, institutional, economic, and normative in nature.

To be ready for successful EU enlargement in the future, we have to be cognisant of the past. In this chapter, the experience that was accumulated during the previous rounds of enlargement will be studied in order to answer the first research question of this book, i.e. the parameters of the enlargement process in the past. Its purpose is twofold: First, to contextualise the authors' contributions within the broader evolution of EU enlargement policy, demonstrating how contemporary enlargement architecture emerged through decades of practice, legal development, and political negotiation; and second, to integrate the findings of the four individual studies into a coherent and analytically unified account of the legal, institutional, and economic dimensions of enlargement.

Four substantial analytical chapters are contained in this Part of the book that converge into a multidimensional and holistic examination of enlargement as a uniquely complex process. The individual chapters explore the historical and conceptual evolution of accession requirements (Petar Bačić, Chapter I.2); the procedural and institutional mechanics of the accession process (Eva Zorková, Chapter I.3); the financial, legal, and administrative support framework provided by the EU to candidate countries (Kateřina Frumarová, Chapter I.4); and the detailed system of special rules, transitional periods and derogations applied during past enlargement rounds (Alena Krunková; Chapter I.5) The integration of these chapters provides

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an unusually detailed and layered understanding of the dynamics, challenges, and structural logic underpinning enlargement.

The first substantive chapter explores the EU enlargement as a constitutional process. As the contribution of Bačić demonstrates, the evolution of accession requirements reflects the deeper constitutionalisation of the European project. Although the founding Treaties declared an openness to other European countries sharing the EU's ideals, early enlargements relied heavily on political discretion and pragmatic economic compatibility. The turning point came with the tectonic geopolitical shifts of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the EU faced the historic prospect of integrating the post-socialist democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. In response, the EU formally articulated the so-called Copenhagen criteria – political, economic, and legislative requirements of candidate countries, and embedded them within the broader development of EU primary law and institutional reform. Bačić demonstrates that the development of accession conditionality, particularly after the Copenhagen European Council in 1993, reflects the EU's effort to define itself as a community of values grounded in democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, and to ensure that newly acceding states could integrate into the increasingly complex *acquis communautaire*. Historical analysis further traces how successive rounds of enlargement, from the accessions of Southern post-dictatorial states in 1980s to the monumental 'big bang' enlargement of 2004 and subsequent instances of Balkan enlargements, led to the steady expansion of accession conditions and the refinement of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

Through the detailed examination of these developments, Bačić highlights that enlargement has always evolved in tandem with changes within the EU itself, including institutional deepening, Treaty reforms and substantive policy expansion. Thus, enlargement functions to some extent as a mirror of the EU's internal evolution and as a catalyst for its constitutional maturation.

The contribution of Zorková complements this historical and conceptual understanding by offering a systematic account of the procedural and institutional framework that governs the accession process. Zorková shows that enlargement is not just a single event but rather an elaborate and multi-stage administrative and legal procedure, structured around screening processes, negotiation chapters, institutional partnerships and preparatory mechanisms, and above all, rigorous monitoring. Central to this process is the Commission, which conducts screening, evaluates readiness, issues annual progress reports and formulates negotiating positions, as well as the Council, the European Parliament, and a multitude of specialised working groups and committees. Zorková emphasises that enlargement involves deep pre-accession participation, whereby candidate countries are gradually integrated into the daily functioning of EU institutions, enabling them to internalise administrative norms, legislative standards, and policy practices even before formal membership. This participation extends across a wide spectrum of institutional structures, including Commission expert groups, Council working parties, and specialised agencies. Enlargement therefore operates not merely as a gateway into the

EU but as a phased process of embedding candidate states into the administrative and regulatory culture of the EU.

Furthermore, the analysis of Zorková highlights that the institutional framework of enlargement has itself grown more sophisticated as the EU has expanded. In particular, the ‘big bang’ enlargement of 2004 required the EU to develop far more structured screening, negotiation and monitoring mechanisms to ensure fairness and consistency across a heterogeneous group of candidates. The development of these mechanisms underscores that enlargement is not only a legal process but also a major exercise in administrative governance, requiring continuous coordination among EU institutions and national administrations.

Elaborating this theme, the chapter by Frumarová provides an in-depth examination of the extensive financial, technical, and legal support architecture that accompanies the accession process. Her analysis shows that pre-accession assistance is not a peripheral complement to conditionality but a structural pillar of enlargement. Beginning with the early programmes like PHARE (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies), SAPARD (Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development) and ISPA (Instrument for Structural Policies for Pre-Accession), and culminating in the creation of the unified Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) in 2007, now in its third iteration (IPA III), the EU developed a comprehensive system designed to support candidate states in meeting the political, economic, and legislative requirements of membership. The IPA III framework, as Frumarová demonstrates, integrates multi-annual financial planning, sector-specific strategies, thematic windows and performance-based conditionality. It is designed to strengthen the rule of law, public administration, judicial systems, market competitiveness, transport and environmental infrastructure, as well as alignment with the *acquis* across all negotiating clusters.

Frumarová also highlights the significance of TAIEX (Technical Assistance and Information Exchange) and Twinning instruments, which facilitate the transfer of administrative and legal expertise from Member State institutions to candidate states. These tools have indeed proven indispensable in fostering durable institutional capacity. Additionally, the analysis reveals the EU’s adaptive approach to emerging geopolitical challenges. The establishment of the Ukraine Facility serves as an example of how the EU increasingly uses pre-accession financial instruments not only to support legal approximation but also to strengthen macroeconomic stability, resilience, reconstruction and security.

The contribution of Frumarová thus underscores that enlargement cannot succeed without a robust system of financial and technical support. Without adequate funding, administrative know-how, and legal uniformity mechanisms, the deep reforms required for accession would be unattainable. Enlargement is therefore supported by a multi-tiered architecture of partnership, cooperation, and capacity-building.

The final contribution by Krunková introduces a dimension that is often under-examined, yet fundamental to the architecture of enlargement: the granting of special rules, transitional periods, derogations and other exemptions concerning

the acceding states. Krunková systematically maps the logic, purpose, and evolution of transitional arrangements, demonstrating that these mechanisms emerge from the tension between the EU's need for uniform legal application and the practical constraints faced by candidate countries undergoing profound structural transformation. Krunková shows that exemptions perform a dual function: on the one hand, facilitating gradual integration by allowing newly acceding states time to adjust their regulatory systems, economic structures and administrative capacities to the demands of the *acquis*, and on the other, protecting existing Member States and the EU as a whole by preventing disruptions to labour markets, sensitive sectors (especially agriculture), environmental compliance regimes, financial systems, and public administration.

Her analysis spans all the rounds of enlargement since the 1970s to the accession of Croatia in 2013. Across these cases, Krunková identifies recurring patterns: transitional restrictions on the free movement of workers, staged introduction of agricultural subsidies, safeguards in environmental and sanitary regimes, delays in joining the Schengen and Euro areas and temporary limits on land acquisition by foreigners. Her contribution reveals that enlargement involves not only full adoption of the *acquis* but also a period of differentiated integration, during which the candidate state participates in some obligations but not others, and during which existing Member States may apply protective measures. These flexible arrangements, far from undermining the EU law, reflect the Union's capacity to manage diversity and to integrate states at different stages of economic development and administrative readiness. They also highlight that uniformity of effect, rather than uniformity of timing, is the guiding logic of enlargement.

Taken together, the four contributions reveal enlargement as a highly integrated, multidimensional process, structured around three foundational pillars. The first one concerns conditionality and constitutional principles. The evolving specification of accession criteria reflect the EU's normative commitments and constitutional values. Enlargement is a test of candidates' democratic resilience, rule-of-law structures and market readiness. The second one deals with institutionalisation and administrative governance. Enlargement is executed through a dense network of institutional mechanisms designed to standardise the process, promote fairness and ensure accountability. The final one addresses support, adaptation and flexibility. Financial assistance, legal approximation tools, administrative capacity-building, special rules and transitional arrangements allow both the EU and candidate states to mitigate integration shocks and maintain system stability.

These three pillars are not independent but mutually reinforcing. Conditionality provides the normative objectives; institutional procedures ensure transparent and rule-based implementation; and support instruments, together with transitional flexibility, operationalise the reforms necessary for sustained compliance. The synergy among these pillars constitutes the contemporary EU enlargement model.