

CONCLUSIONS



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The Western Balkans and the post-Soviet republics which managed to secure to candidacy status represent the potential outer borders of the EU. As aptly observed by Filipec in his Chapter:

‘For centuries, rulers, scholars and even children at schools have considered this seemingly simple question: where are the borders of Europe? Since 23 June 2022, when the European Council granted EU candidate status to Moldova and Ukraine, and recognised Georgia for possible EU membership, the answer is much clearer than before’.

Indeed, all of the Balkans are currently within the area of potential EU membership. The prospect of Türkiye ever becoming a Member State is not plausible. Similarly, on the eastern flank, it is ‘*unthinkable*’ today that Belarus, Russia or Azerbaijan would ever apply for a Membership, as Filipec notes. Thus, it seems that the EU has reached its full potential size. At the same time, it is hardly guaranteed that all the candidates of today will one day reach ‘full’ membership, as we understand it today. The experience of Western Balkans attests that the long may be very long and frustrating.

The analyses collected in Part III facilitate evidence-anchored conclusions about the state and prospects of integration in the Western Balkans and the post-Soviet republics under review. The answer that emerges is that the successful integration of these countries is achievable if political incentives, legal policy and economic capacity are jointly aligned under a credible, staged and predictable enlargement strategy.

Concerning the Western Balkans, political acceptance is a major bottleneck on both sides. Even where elite consensus favours Europeanisation, popular support in several Western Balkan polities displays erosion over time when negotiations drag

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without visible pay-offs. Conversely, EU-side acceptance is uneven and candidate-specific; Montenegro is the only candidate having majority support in the entire EU. The Western Balkan overview corroborates the utility of gradual integration as a political and economic pacer; it however works only if progress benchmarks are transparent and rewarded rapidly enough to be visible to domestic publics and administrations.

Distrust among the Western Balkan nations still limits the extent of their co-operation. The Common Regional Market may serve as an example in the area of economy. The project, based upon the idea of four freedoms (free movement of goods, persons, services and capital) known from the EU law, was launched in 2020. It has achieved a lot, including a 19% increase of trade in goods and services and even the doubling of intra-regional trade volume in goods,¹ it is nonetheless still very far from the common market, as we understand it in the EU. Similarly, even though legal approximation was successful in some areas, in particular certain sectors of the economy, there still remain many profound constitutional changes that need to be undertaken before the accession process continues. Proposals for extensive transitional clauses are frequent.

Robust pre-accession assistance is necessary. The flagship projects, including IPA III, TAIEX or Twinning seem to be working, more intensive involvement however appear to be necessary in order to result in administrative capabilities that would be able to survive political cycles. More attention needs to be afforded to project governance, absorption quality and market readiness. Serbia's decelerating reforms illustrate how policy hesitation quickly capitalises into both legal and economic delays.

It should be admitted that the approximation process has lost momentum, resulting in limited involvement and motivation on the side of both the candidate countries and the EU. Gradual integration attempts to overcome the 'enlargement fatigue'. Gradual integration, however, only works if it is truly gradualist (phased and conditional), not a permanent limbo. The 'phase-in' approach only sustains political support if every step is predictable, tangible and traceable, and at the same time reversible in case of non-compliance. Otherwise, it risks becoming a halfway house that demotivates reformers and confirms sceptics' fears of a second-class status. The Western Balkans therefore test the EU's capacity to govern a staircase: each stair with clear criteria, budgetary means, legal certainty and a political narrative that connects progress today with membership tomorrow.

Conversely, Ukraine and Moldova show that acceleration is possible, but must be stabilised. The speed of their candidacy and opening of negotiations signals that geopolitical urgency can shorten formal timelines without sacrificing conditionality. Yet speed is not equivalent to absorption quality. The integration dividend must be front-loaded via carefully designed phasing-in (market and programme access, sectoral participation) tied to verifiable rule-of-law and governance benchmarks. This is essential to prevent reform fatigue and to anchor reforms amid war-time and post-war reconstruction pressures (Ukraine) and capacity limitations (Moldova).

1 Common Regional Market, no date.

Georgia's 'pause-to-prepare' may not be a detour but a design choice, if the time is used. By suspending the application process until the end of 2028, Georgia has created a window for administrative consolidation and legal deepening. The case study presented in this chapter highlights how a pause can be utilised to implement sequential approximations in high-impact clusters such as the judiciary, anti-corruption efforts, public administration, competition and state aid control or financial supervision. This approach aims to codify reforms in a way that makes reversing them costlier and encourages lasting compliance habits. If used well, the pause increases the probability that post-pause phasing-in produces durable integration, not just formal alignment.

Despite the acceleration at the beginning, the accession still remains a very demanding, and necessarily time-consuming, endeavour. It does not need to be as protracted as in the case of some Western Balkan countries, but, judging from the experience of Bulgaria and Romania, at least 10 years of intensive negotiations seems to be a reasonable expectation. Any talk about Ukraine becoming a full Member State within a few years is incompatible with the current understanding of membership.

Full attention and motivation on the side of both the EU and the candidates will be necessary. To keep the momentum, the gradual integration seems to be indispensable. Conditionality remains the constitutional backbone, especially for the rule of law. For today's candidates, the EU must anticipate the shift from technical transposition to values-charged compliance *ex ante*. Therefore, benchmarks on judicial independence and fundamental rights should be front-loaded and stress-tested through pre-accession monitoring, peer review, and targeted fund conditionality in order to minimise systemic infringement risks after accession. The post-Soviet cluster's diversity in state capacity and governance baselines makes such anticipation indispensable.

At the same time, as shown by the case of Bulgaria and Romania, the post-accession transitory provisions may be expected to be more robust than in the past, covering not only the 'traditional' protective limitations (free movement of workers, free movement of capital) and granting of time for long-term investment (environmental protection), but also post-accession monitoring of compliance and possibly conditional limitation of certain rights of the new members.

It thus seems to be the case that the immediate 'equal' membership status of the candidates is an illusion. There will be a differentiation among the Member States (as there is differentiation even today). With this in mind, there might be more room for granting permanent derogations from EU law to the candidates. In this regard, we lack experience. In the past rounds of enlargement, practically no permanent derogations were negotiated. The same applies now to Montenegro, the most advanced candidate. And even in case of Serbia, where the negotiations seem to have reached their limits in some areas, the possibility of derogations does not seem to be thoroughly explored. Given the historical experience and diversity of the candidate countries, this will arguably have to change.

In this Part, we undertook to answer the question of how the current candidate countries prepare themselves for the future membership. The plain answer seems to be: not sufficiently. After years of debates, the prospect of the Western Balkan countries actually joining the EU (with the exception of Montenegro) is still very distant. The same applies to the post-soviet republics in the east. If the EU earnestly wants to continue with the enlargement process resulting in the successful integration of the candidates, the following points need to be taken into account.

First, enlargement is a lengthy process. In order to keep the momentum and the necessary political support, it needs to be predictably structured. The benefits for the candidate must materialise not only at this end, but already during the process. The gradual integration seems to go in this direction. For it to work, proper calibration is essential to demonstrate benefits while maintaining leverage. A phased approach to accessing programmes, funding envelopes, specific segments of the common market, and certain EU policies is the only scalable method to reward progress and sanction stagnation without jeopardising the overall process. However, each phase must include rights and obligations that are meaningful, monitorable and politically communicable.

Second, pre-accession assistance is indispensable for the enlargement process to be successful. The EU has the right tools, but they need to be applied in a consistent and predictable way. More funding may also be necessary in this regard.

Third, accession should not be confused with integration. Pre-accession design must anticipate the post-accession shift from rule-taking to rule-maintaining. Instruments such as post-accession monitoring (based on the experience with Cooperation and Verification mechanisms in the case of Bulgaria and Romania) should be foreseen contractually for new members; narrowly targeted, time-bound, benchmarked and designed to incentivise compliance rather than punish.

Fourth, differences in membership need to be acknowledged. Differentiated instruments might be utilised, and permanent derogations from EU law may be accepted. At the same time ring-fencing the defining features of membership, as defined in the Introduction to this book is essential, which include including mutual trust within the legal order, institutional parity in decision-making and uniformity of effect of the EU law.

Finally, enlargement needs to be synchronised with EU internal reforms. The number and size of the potential candidate countries is such that they would significantly change the internal functioning of the EU. The next enlargement round is thus inseparable from the fundamental revisions of the EU's internal architecture, which may need to change institutionally, substantively, as well as conceptually.

If Part I revealed enlargement as a constitutional-administrative project, and Part II measured the effectiveness of integration among recent entrants, Part III shows the way of steering the next wave toward success after accession. The Western Balkans and the post-soviet republics bring to the EU not only demographic, economic and geopolitical weight, but also a stress test of the EU's capacity to integrate diversity without diluting identity. The blueprint that emerges is cautious, conditional and

credible: a gradual, benchmarked, two-sided process, where rewards match verified progress, transitions are time-bound and membership retains its distinctive legal and political character. Only under these conditions will enlargement remain the other side of EU reforms and integration quality the measure by which the next wave is judged a genuine success.

In the final Part, we will discuss in detail the ultimate parameters of future enlargement: how could the process of gradual integration be improved; what would the reforms of the EU look like; what conditions should ultimately be prescribed for the candidates; and are there any viable alternatives to membership, as we understand it today?

PART IV

THE FUTURE OF EU
ENLARGEMENT

