

CONCLUSION



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The combined findings of the three chapters contained in this Part allow us to formulate a comprehensive answer to the second research question: How successful was the integration of the new Member States after accession? The analysis reveals that the integration process of the 2004, 2007 and 2013 enlargements was both remarkably successful in many respects and structurally constrained or contested in others, leading to an overall picture best described as complex, multifaceted and uneven.

Regarding the legal alignment, Gregorz Pastuszko's chapter clearly demonstrates that the new Member States have, by and large, achieved a high degree of legal alignment with EU law. The number of infringement proceedings they face is broadly comparable to that of the EU-15, indicating that compliance problems are not uniquely or disproportionately concentrated in Central and Eastern Europe.

However, the nature of infringements has evolved. Whereas early years saw cases primarily concerning the non-transposition of directives (e.g., hundreds of non-communication cases in Czechia, Hungary and Poland), the last decade witnessed a dramatic increase in cases touching upon core constitutional values: judicial independence, minority rights, asylum policy, media freedom and anti-discrimination. These issues have generated deeper conflicts between such Member States and EU institutions, revealing that while formal legal alignment may be strong, the substantive constitutional commitments required by EU membership remain contested in some national contexts. This shift also underscores the fact that EU law has become a constitutional framework, not merely a regulatory one. Infringements now often concern the very foundations of democratic governance – separation of powers, checks and balances, and adherence to the rule of law. Member States that adopted the *acquis* during the accession process now face the challenge of sustaining alignment in the face of domestic political pressures. Where governments pursue illiberal reforms,

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this often triggers systemic infringement actions or other mechanisms such as the Article 7 TEU procedure.

Thus, the legal integration of the new Member States can be summarised as a success in terms of compliance capacity, but one increasingly constrained by political contestation. What is being tested now is not the ability to align the legal orders but the willingness to maintain the constitutional commitments accepted upon accession, as interpreted by the CJEU.

The economic outcomes of integration, as analysed by Cristina Procházková Ilinitchi, are one of the clearest success stories of enlargement. The new Member States, and especially the Visegrad group, experienced notable GDP growth, increasing competitiveness, enhanced trade economic integration and significant convergence toward EU-15 income levels. Detailed quantitative analysis shows that the Visegrad economies increased their average growth rates from 3.2% (pre-accession) to 5% (post-accession); Slovakia and Poland in particular demonstrated extraordinary improvements, with Slovakia achieving an average post-accession growth of 7.4%. Trade with the EU increased rapidly, with Visegrad exports to the EU reaching 80% of total exports by 2004 and strengthening further thereafter.

These gains were facilitated not only by internal market access but also by massive EU structural and cohesion funds, which financed infrastructure, innovation and public administration reforms, as well as regional development initiatives. Yet the extent to which these funds translated into sustainable growth varied significantly across countries. Effective absorption required competent administrative structures, transparent governance, and coherent strategic planning, all of which differed among the new Member States. The money coming from the EU funds also need to be effectively targeted, as economic convergence may be accelerated by prioritising infrastructure development, innovation and export sophistication, critical for sustainable growth. In summary, economic integration has been highly successful where national governance and administrative capacity were strong, and less effective where such capacity was limited. Integration provided opportunities, but the exploitation of these opportunities was uneven.

Finally, the political dimension of integration reveals a picture of both consolidation and contestation. János Simon's chapter demonstrates that EU membership significantly contributed to strengthening democratic norms, increasing the sophistication of political culture and expanding regional cooperation among Visegrad countries. Public opinion data illustrate growing levels of trust and cooperation within the region, as well as a strong sense of dual identity, where citizens increasingly identify as both national and European. By 2021, 86% of Hungarians, for example, reported pride in being European, alongside similarly high levels of national pride.

However, political integration remains contested in areas involving sovereignty, national identity, migration and constitutional pluralism. Value conflicts between Western European liberalism and Central European conservatism have emerged as a central axis of political differentiation within the EU. These fault lines are not simply institutional; they derive from historical memory, cultural outlook, and collective

identity, making them more resistant to rapid convergence. Migration policy, in particular, has become a symbolic battleground, with Visegrad nations showing overwhelming resistance to mandatory relocation schemes and to the broader liberal migration approach associated with Western states.

Thus, political integration cannot be reduced to institutional reforms; it is also a matter of deep sociocultural adaptation, shaped by historical experiences and normative preferences. The data that Simon managed to collect reveal convergence in democratic behaviour but divergence in value orientations, pointing to a form of pluralistic integration that is stable yet not uniform.

The principal insight arising from the combined analyses is that integration is most successful where legal compliance, economic development and political culture reinforce each other. When one dimension is weak, the others may compensate, but only to a point. Strong economic growth can reinforce political legitimacy and promote acceptance of EU norms. Robust legal institutions can compensate for fluctuations in politics and make the disbursement of economic assistance more effective, preventing corruption in particular. Moreover, a supportive political culture can strengthen compliance and facilitate structural reforms. At the same time, the weakening of one dimension, e.g., political contestation in the rule-of-law area, can disrupt the balance, leading to tensions with the EU that spill over into other domains, such as fund absorption or judicial cooperation.

The chapters in this Part demonstrate that EU integration is not simply a technocratic process but a profound transformation of states, societies, and identities. The new Member States have undergone extensive changes since accession, reshaping their legal orders, economies and political cultures. Yet integration is never ‘complete’. It is a continuous, evolving relationship between national sovereignty and supranational authority, between economic opportunity and institutional discipline, between national identity and European belonging. The experiences of the 2004–2013 enlargements highlight both the promise and the challenges of deepening the European Union. Their successes show that integration can work remarkably well; their difficulties reveal where future reforms – of both the EU and national political systems – will be needed to maintain cohesion in an enlarged Union.

Thus, in order to answer the second research question, the following observations may be made:

First, for the post-accession integration to be successful, a robust pre-accession assistance is necessary. This needs to concern both legal and economic alignment. This not only needs the legal order of a candidate country to be in line with the *acquis*, but the candidate also needs to create capacity to implement the EU law effectively after the accession. This proved to be a problem for many ‘new’ Member States; the Czech Republic may serve as an example in this regard. Similarly, economic integration even before the accession proved to be helpful.

Second, transitory periods may help both the candidate country and the ‘rest’ of the EU. Their usage in the past has been relatively rare, but they might be employed more frequently in the future. Conversely, the experience with permanent

derogations from EU law is very limited. This is to be expected in today's concept of 'universal' one-size-fits-all membership, it may nonetheless need to change in the future, as we will discuss in Part IV.

Third, even though accession is a lengthy process, leading to profound changes to the laws and economy of the candidate country, the fundamental perceptions of its population, particularly concerning the 'axiomatic' issues of values and national identity, take even longer to evolve, if at all. Too much pressure in this regard may lead to disenchantment and diminishing support for EU integration. Admittedly, not much attention has been devoted to these issues in the past accession processes, but it may need to become central in the future.

Overall, it appears that 'gradual' integration, during which candidates and the EU become more and more intertwined, is effective since the actual accession does not result in an acute 'shock' for either party. This leads us directly to the next part of the book, in which we will analyse the approach adopted by the EU to the current candidate countries.

PART III

THE CANDIDATES:
HOPES, FEARS AND
EXPECTATIONS

