

INTRODUCTION



MICHAL PETR

The third part of this book turns from the retrospective (Part I) and evaluative (Part II) vantage points to a distinctly prospective task: it examines the current state and plausible trajectories of candidate countries in two strategic theatres of the European project, the Western Balkans and the eastern neighbourhood of the post-Soviet space. The analytical objective is twofold. First, to contextualise the political, legal and socio-economic conditions in which aspirants are preparing for membership, in particular how they position themselves with respect to the Copenhagen criteria, adapt to the EU's evolving accession methodology and navigate the increasingly salient paradigm of 'gradual integration'. And second, to identify the integration risks and opportunities that follow from this preparation and to distil the specific conditions under which these countries might achieve not merely formal accession but a sustained, high-quality post-accession integration. In this way, this Part shall provide answers to the third research question: how do the current candidate countries prepare themselves for the future membership?

Part III is organised around two regional clusters of candidates: the Western Balkans and the post-Soviet republics now (more or less) on a European course. Within each cluster, the contributions contained in this Part combine a broad political overview with deep legal case-studies that translate general dynamics into specific accession-law problems. Specifically, the Part presents an overarching political analysis of the Western Balkans by Jakov Žižić, a doctrinal legal analysis of Serbia's accession path by Dalibor Đukić, a political overview of the eastern neighbourhood by Ondřej Filipec and a legal case study on Georgia's approximation with EU law by Tamara Aleksidze and Maka Nutsubidze. Coherent with the book-wide methodology, Part III maintains the three-level lens – economic, legal and political – in order to analyse the state-of-play and prospects of these two regions. This architecture operationalises the book's guiding idea: integration quality cannot be projected from a single metric. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of political

Michal Petr (2026) 'Introduction'. In: Michal Petr (ed.) *EU Enlargement and Successful Integration: Is There a Way?* Volume I., pp. 317–319. Miskolc–Budapest, Central European Academic Publishing.



https://doi.org/10.54237/profnet.2026.mpeesitw_III.1

will, legal approximation, administrative capacity, economic viability and societal consent.

The accession path of the Western Balkans countries is very long, starting with Montenegro applying for EU membership already in 2008. Still, after more than a decade, none of these counties (with the exception of Montenegro itself) is facing any meaningful possibility to join the EU in the foreseeable future. Albania has recently opened all negotiating chapters but closed none of these; Serbia advances with a notable deceleration in reforms and waning domestic enthusiasm; North Macedonia faces constitutionally conditional openings; Bosnia and Herzegovina has not yet reached the full negotiations phase. Kosovo does not even enjoy universal recognition among all the current Member States and cannot therefore achieve even the status of a candidate. Such diversity makes the Balkans a laboratory for both the promises and frictions (and disillusion) of gradual integration.

The Western Balkans remain the EU's most mature enlargement theatre and, paradoxically, the most politically elastic one. Despite the Commission's renewed political commitment to the enlargement, any actual accession still appears distant. At the same time, as Žižić observes in his Chapter, the 'transformative influence of the EU' remains limited. He further notes that the 'EU's conditionality of the integration process with political and economic reforms proved to be both ineffective and inconsistent in the case of the Western Balkans'. We concluded in the previous Chapter that successful integration needs time; but if a long time had passed without there being any realistic prospect of actually acceding the EU within a foreseeable timeframe, the support for accession fades, both in the candidate country and the EU as a whole, resulting in eroding domestic support and diluted reform incentives, as the Serbian case particularly illustrates.

The 'gradual integration' method attempts to counteract reform fatigue by front-loading tangible benefits (policy phasing-in, market access increments, participation in EU programmes) proportionally to verified progress. Part III explores how far this logic can realign incentives in the Western Balkans. Still, from the perspective of political alignment, public attitude vis-à-vis the EU has drifted downward in parts of the region. Meanwhile, on the EU side, external acceptance varies widely by candidate and by Member State, with only Montenegro registering majority support EU-wide. These asymmetries are not technicalities; they are core constraints on the credibility and pace of the process.

Concerning legal alignment, it is interesting to note that the process of approximation is often linked to constitutional changes that the candidates have difficulties conducting, as can be demonstrated by the example of Serbia or Northern Macedonia. The fact that these changes have not yet been made even after so many years of accession negotiations epitomises the frustration stemming from the process. The same may be observed with regard to economic alignment, where the process of regional economic integration is tediously slow.

Looking at the post-Soviet countries on the EU's boarder, these, for a long time, have not been treated as candidates at all. They only cooperated with the EU

within the Eastern Partnership, which was for many years regarded as an effective framework. The geopolitical changes nonetheless enabled Ukraine and Moldova to rapidly secure the candidacy status in 2022 and to open the negotiations. Georgia, on the other hand, obtained candidacy a year later but suspended its application process until the end of 2028.

This cluster of countries is also far from homogeneous: it juxtaposes war-time resilience and reform acceleration (Ukraine), state-capacity-driven pragmatism (Moldova) and strategic temporisation (Georgia). While all three share the strategic horizon of membership, they are differentiated by security context, state capacity, judicial-governance baselines and domestic politics and economy. This sub-region therefore stress-tests the limits of uniformity and conditionality: what the EU must ask candidates to do before accession, and what the EU must do itself, in particular if more differentiation becomes the likely price of keeping the door open without eroding integration quality. This crystallises the key proposition of this book: enlargement and internal EU reforms are interdependent.

The ‘gravity’ of this region is enormous. If Ukraine were to join the EU eventually, it would become the largest and at the same time the poorest Member State. It would have to substantially overhaul its legal order and economy. The same applies to the other two candidates. In order to avoid the ‘fatigue’ brought about by ‘never-ending’ negotiations, reliable gradation of pre-accession alignments, including the phasing-in of certain EU policies, segments of the internal market and some EU programmes, may be indispensable to sustain momentum without compromising integration quality.

Part III thus explicitly builds on the thesis that enlargement and internal EU reform are two sides of the same coin. The question ‘what will the EU look like when candidates accede?’ is not rhetorical; it is an accession condition *de facto*. The Western Balkans and the post-Soviet republics thus push the EU toward institutional clarity: either full membership with credible transitional arrangements, or dense associative regimes that respect the CJEU’s jurisprudence on mutual trust and preserve the distinctiveness of EU membership.

