

INTRODUCTION



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The second part of this book addresses the second research question identified in the overarching structure of the volume: How successful has the European Union (EU) been in integrating the ‘new’ Member States, with special emphasis on those that acceded in 2004, 2007 and 2013 and especially on the Central European Countries. This Part aims to synthesise and evaluate the integration performance of these countries through three disciplinary lenses – law, economy and social science. It also provides a conceptual foundation for the following Part III, which shifts attention from new Member States to current candidate countries. By understanding the successes, difficulties, and structural determinants of integration in Central and Eastern Europe, we gain insight into the prospects and challenges facing future enlargements, as well as the reforms needed within the EU to sustain its internal cohesion.

Whereas Part I reconstructed the institutional architecture, normative evolution and procedural framework of enlargement, the present Part moves from process to outcome, examining to what extent the post-communist Member States have succeeded in aligning their legal orders, economies and political systems with those of the EU. Taken together, the chapters in this Part explore the quality, depth and sustainability of integration. Their findings demonstrate that integration is not a uniform or linear process; rather, it is a dynamic and often contested endeavour that must be evaluated in its multidimensional complexity.

As the three rounds of enlargement of 2004, 2007 and 2013 have progressively transformed the EU from a relatively compact ‘Western’ organisation into a deeply heterogeneous political and legal community, questions surrounding the effectiveness of integration have acquired new urgency. To what extent have the new Member States fully internalised the EU’s normative foundations, successfully adapted to its economic structures and developed a political culture compatible with the rest of the EU is not only an academic problem; it has direct implications for the EU’s constitutional integrity, economic cohesion and geopolitical capacity.

Michal Petr (2026) ‘Introduction’. In: Michal Petr (ed.) *EU Enlargement and Successful Integration: Is There a Way?* Volume I., pp. 171–174. Miskolc–Budapest, Central European Academic Publishing.



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

Part II consists of three substantial, disciplinary-specific chapters, each devoted to assessing one dimension of integration. The first one focuses on legal alignment. In Chapter II.2, Grzegorz Pastuszko offers a comprehensive analysis of the infringement proceedings initiated against Central and Eastern European (CEE) Member States since their accession. His chapter provides both an analytical overview of the mechanics of infringement actions under Arts. 258–260 TFEU and a detailed empirical mapping of the proceedings initiated between 2004 and 2024. He shows that while early infringement cases predominantly concerned technical failures, such as delays in transposing directives, later years witnessed an increasing number of cases ‘dividing the liberal West from the conservative East’, i.e. cases based on axiological, social, cultural and constitutional differences, involving politically sensitive issues such as the rule of law, judicial independence, minority rights and migration policy. The infringement procedure thus emerges as a central instrument of post-accession supervision, but also as a site of friction and resistance, especially where EU standards collide with the domestic political agendas of certain governments.

Chapter II.3, authored by Cristina Procházková Ilinitchi, examines the economic effects of EU accession on the new Member States. Her analysis explores GDP growth rates, economic convergence, trade integration, competitiveness, and the role of EU structural and cohesion funds. Her chapter provides robust empirical evidence that accession has accelerated growth and convergence across most of the new Member States, although outcomes have varied depending on domestic governance structures, institutional capacity and the absorption of EU funds. While states such as the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia have demonstrated strong post-accession growth, Hungary’s trajectory has been more uneven. The chapter also stresses the importance of integration into the EU internal market, which enabled economies of scale, trade diversification and technological upgrading.

Chapter II.4, contributed by János Simon, investigates the political and sociocultural consequences of EU membership in the Visegrad countries. Drawing on an unparalleled dataset comprising three decades of public opinion surveys, the chapter demonstrates that EU integration has profoundly shaped political attitudes, citizen identities and patterns of regional cooperation. At the same time, Simon highlights the emergence of political fault lines – particularly between ‘federalist’ and ‘sovereigntist’ visions of the EU, and between Western liberal and Central European conservative preferences. These tensions, which frequently manifest themselves in debates over migration, sovereignty, minority rights and ultimately the future model of EU integration, have become a defining feature of the political integration landscape in the region.

Taken together, these three chapters illuminate integration as a multilevel transformation, unfolding simultaneously in legal, economic and political spheres. It is clear that legal integration involves more than the formal adoption of the *acquis* during accession process. It requires the sustained alignment of national legal orders with EU law, effective judicial enforcement, and practical compliance with EU norms. Pastuszko shows that although ‘new’ Member States generally perform on par with

the EU-15 in terms of infringement numbers, the qualitative nature of infringements has evolved significantly: while initial cases focused on transposition, recent conflicts increasingly concern constitutional structures, separation of powers, minority protection and migration policy. This shift reflects the deeper constitutionalisation of EU law, but it has also triggered resistance from some governments, especially where EU norms are perceived as infringing on national identity or political sovereignty. This being said, these ‘axiomatic’ cases, although drawing most attention from the public, constitute only a fraction of the overall number of infringement proceedings.

Economic integration, through trade integration, convergence, market openness and EU funds, has been one of the most successful dimensions of post-accession developments. Procházková Ilínitchi’s results demonstrate that the Visegrad countries experienced substantial growth in the decade following accession, with Poland and Slovakia outperforming EU averages in several periods. Structural and cohesion funds supported infrastructure, innovation and regional development, contributing to the narrowing of disparities. Nonetheless, weaknesses in institutional capacity, public administration and corruption have hampered the full realisation of these benefits in some Member States. Economic integration thus appears promising but uneven, contingent on domestic reforms.

Finally, concerning political integration, it has been demonstrated that it requires the development of democratic norms, civic behaviour patterns and a shared sense of belonging to the European community. Simon’s chapter shows that EU integration stimulated democratic consolidation and contributed to rising levels of regional trust and cooperation. The cultivation of a dual identity – simultaneously European and national – has advanced significantly in the Visegrad region. However, divergences in value orientations (e.g. attitudes toward migration, sovereignty, or constitutional identity) pose challenges for deeper political integration. The chapter exposes the cultural and historical factors shaping political attitudes and emphasises that political integration is inherently slower and more contested than economic or legal integration.

Across the three chapters, several common themes emerge. First, integration is path-dependent and context-sensitive. The effectiveness of integration depends heavily on the domestic political trajectory of each state. Changes in political leadership, such as those observed in Hungary or Poland, may strengthen or weaken integration dynamics, especially in value-laden areas like the rule of law or fundamental rights.

Second, integration outcomes are uneven across states and across dimensions. A state may display strong economic performance, but face challenges in legal or political integration. Conversely, a state with relatively smooth legal alignment may struggle economically. Integration is therefore best understood as a multidimensional equilibrium, not as a single metric. It has also been shown that the three areas of integration – legal, economic and political – are inherently interconnected and mutually influence one another. Economic growth is dependent on legal order and

institutions. Legal alignment, especially in the context of infringement proceedings, is influenced by political forces and axiomatic identity values. Political perception is shaped by economic performance.

And third, the EU's instruments of integration evolve over time. The scope and intensity of infringement proceedings, the conditionality attached to EU funds and the political expectations placed on Member States have all evolved since 2004. Recent years have seen the emergence of more assertive EU oversight tools, especially in the rule-of-law domain. This has a substantial impact on the public perception concerning the question, whether the integration had been a success. It also ought to be stressed in this connection that societal perceptions matter. Public support, national identity and collective memory significantly shape the success of integration. Political integration cannot be understood without analysing public opinion and the symbolic dimensions of belonging, which Simon's chapter does in exceptional depth.