

CONCLUSION



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The combined insights of the four contributions allow us to draw several overarching conclusions about the nature, evolution and also future trajectory of EU enlargement. Enlargement emerges from this integrated perspective not as a single legal act, but as a transformative process with constitutional, institutional, socio-economic and geopolitical implications for both candidate states and the EU itself.

The historical evolution of enlargement as a constitutional process of normative alignment, described by Petar Bačić, makes it clear that enlargement has gradually evolved into a constitutional enterprise. The accession conditions, especially those stemming from the Copenhagen criteria, have become substantive requirements for participation in a value-based legal order. Democracy, rule of law, human rights and minority protection are now inseparable from accession, and the EU uses enlargement as a mechanism to diffuse and entrench these principles across the continent. This constitutional orientation reinforces the EU's coherence and strengthens its identity as a legal and political community.

Eva Zorková's analysis confirms that enlargement is one of the EU's most administratively complex undertakings. The screening of the *acquis*, negotiation chapters, benchmarks, annual progress reports and inclusion of candidate states in expert groups are designed to ensure that accession proceeds as a rule-based, objective and transparent process. This complexity reflects the structural density of contemporary EU law and the need to ensure that new members can apply and enforce the *acquis* effectively from day one. Enlargement therefore reinforces the institutional robustness and administrative culture of the EU.

The contribution by Kateřina Frumarová demonstrates that accession is impossible without extensive financial and technical support. The evolution from early programmes to IPA III shows how the EU has integrated financial assistance into a strategic framework that supports legislative alignment, economic stabilisation, public administration reform, infrastructure development and judicial capacity.

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The role of TAIEX and Twinning, the thematic windows of IPA III and specialised instruments such as the Ukraine Facility indicate that support mechanisms are now highly targeted, performance-based and closely aligned with accession priorities. Enlargement therefore relies on a complex ecosystem of legal, economic, and administrative support.

Finally, Alena Krunková's detailed reconstruction of transitional periods and derogations underscores that enlargement necessarily involves differentiated integration. Transitional measures allow both the 'old' and 'new' Member States to adjust gradually to the regulatory demands of the internal market, environmental law, agricultural policy, sanitary standards and labour mobility. Meanwhile, safeguard clauses protect the functioning of the internal market and mitigate risks to the economies or legal systems of the Member States. These arrangements demonstrate that enlargement is not an 'all-or-nothing' proposition; rather, it is a legally and economically calibrated process that balances uniform integration with the practical realities of structural diversity across Europe. The use of transitional periods reinforces legal certainty, economic stability and gradual convergence.

At this point, several observations may be made, which serve as an answer to the first research question of this book. First, the precision as well as complexity of the enlargement process is continuously increasing. Starting with the Copenhagen Criteria, the requirements from the candidates are increasingly precise, as is the methodology of their monitoring. It is thus clear what the EU 'wants'. At the same time, the number of such requirements is growing. Each round of the accession negotiations seems to be more and more demanding. This may be partly attributed to the growing complexity of *acquis*, but the Member States seem to be less 'trusting' *vis-à-vis* the candidates and want to be sure that once 'in', they are truly compatible with the rest of the EU.

Second, and notwithstanding the above observation, enlargement remains deeply political. Although the accession framework is increasingly legalised and institutionalised, political decision-making continues to determine the pace and shape of enlargement. Internal political developments in candidate states, Member State preferences, geopolitical pressures and external crises influence accession trajectories. The recent momentum for Ukraine (and to some extent, Moldova) illustrates that geopolitical destabilisation can accelerate political support for enlargement, even while demanding new legal and institutional responses. Enlargement is therefore inseparable from the EU's role as a geopolitical actor. Thus, as aptly observed by Bacic in his Chapter:

'no matter how strict and precise the entire accession process has become, with an increasing number of requirements placed before the candidate countries, determining more objective and measurable standards or benchmarks, it should be noted that enlargement decisions have always been very much motivated by political reasons'.

Third, pre-accession assistance is absolutely necessary. For candidate countries, enlargement means a sweeping transformation, necessitating the reorganisation of political institutions, the reinforcement of judicial independence, modernisation of administrative structures, market liberalisation, environmental reforms and alignment with complex regulatory frameworks. These transformations would be unthinkable without the incentives, guidance, and support provided throughout the accession process by the EU. Similar to the accession criteria, this area has also moved from a set of informal arrangements in the 1970s to a complex regulatory framework that we are dealing with today. Even though strongly streamlined by the IPA III (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance) regulation, the processes and conditions still remain to some extent '*opaque*', as Frumerová rightly points out in her Chapter. As she also observes, the process of pre-accession assistance would further benefit from more conditionality – 'both by appropriately 'rewarding' the progress made by candidate countries and responding adequately to insufficient reforms'. Given the extensive time-span of the negotiations process, a clear system of 'rewards' might indeed keep the candidates invested in the lengthy and demanding transformation process. This leads us to the concept of gradual integration, which will be discussed in Chapter I.4.

Fourth, enlargement is not a one-size-fits-all process. The conditions in the different candidate countries vary significantly. Similarly, the conditions of their actual accession may differ. As Krunková observes in her Chapter, 'each new country had its own reasons, consequences and specific characteristics' of accession. With regard to the last rounds of enlargement, we may identify typical transitory arrangements. The new Member States typically need more time to adapt to the agricultural and environmental requirements of the EU. They want to protect their real estates, most commonly arable land, thus limiting the free movement of capital, and the 'old' members tend to protect their labour markets, thus delaying the free movement of persons. Access to the Schengen and Euro Area are postponed. Conversely, other transitory provisions, and even more so permanent derogations from the EU law, tend to be limited in both scope and time. It remains to be seen whether approach is viable for the future.

Fifth, the monitoring of accession requirements has also moved from the pre-accession stage to the period following the accession, when a candidate has become a full Member State. The Cooperation and Verification Mechanism was introduced in case of Bulgaria and Romania, as is described in Zsolt Kokoly's country report on Romania. This is to be expected in future cases as well.

And finally, the increasing number of Member States was linked to internal reforms during the earliest rounds of enlargement. Enlargement is transformative for both candidate states and the EU itself. Future enlargements will thus require the EU to refine its own governance structures, budgetary mechanisms and enforcement tools. The EU's ability to expand while maintaining coherence depends on its willingness to pursue institutional reforms alongside enlargement. This topic will be explored in Chapter I.4.

When viewed as a whole, the four Chapters of this part of the book reveal enlargement as a comprehensive and transformative process grounded in conditionality, institutionalisation, financial support and adaptive flexibility. It is a constitutional mechanism, a governance system, a development strategy and a geopolitical tool. Enlargement strengthens both the EU and the states that join, while challenging all parties to uphold shared values, sustain legal and administrative integrity, and foster economic and social cohesion. The EU's future, its stability, its legitimacy, its geopolitical capacity, and its constitutional vitality, will continue to be closely tied to the evolution of the enlargement model. As the EU faces new challenges and opportunities, enlargement remains not only a policy domain but a defining feature of the project of European integration.

In the next Part of this book, we will therefore raise the question of how successful the enlargement process and integration of the new Member States has been in the past, and what can be done to improve it in the future.

PART II

MEASURING SUCCESSFUL
INTEGRATION

