

New dynamism in the EU enlargement debate: implications for democratic governance and rule of law conditionality

EU enlargement must be accelerated, but not at the expense of democracy and the rule of law

Since March 2026, the European Commission and groups of member states have put forward five different proposals how to accelerate EU enlargement. This brief examines each of them from the perspective of democratic conditionality, and what they would mean for strengthening democracy and the rule of law in the candidate countries.

Introduction

Since 2022, the new momentum in the EU enlargement process has manifested in a level of dynamism unseen for nearly a decade. The increased prominence of enlargement on the EU's agenda has been driven primarily by security considerations following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, unpredictability in the relation with the US administration and push for advancing Europe's strategic autonomy, and the EU's broader attempt to position itself as a geopolitical actor, particularly under Ursula von der Leyen's second term at the helm of the European Commission.

The desire for a stronger, more capable and actionable Union has also been apparent in discussions about the EU's internal reform and concrete initiatives at the EU level, particularly during the Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2024 when the roadmap for the EU's internal reforms¹ was adopted. While the prospect of accepting new members to the club can serve as a catalyst for speeding up the internal institutional reform debates and their materialisation into concrete steps, adapting the Union to modern-day challenges and realities is needed regardless of enlargement.

In the context of surging far-right nationalism and populism across Europe, it is also clear that the next EU enlargement must be done right - to strengthen the Union and Europe instead of weakening and fragmenting it further, and to showcase the benefits of European integration instead of giving more ammunition to anti-EU forces (both inside and outside) in the bloc. **The challenge is thus how to balance the geopolitical urgency for the next EU enlargement with protection of the Union, its fundamental values and its effective functioning.**

Tectonic shifts in the enlargement discussion: moving from if to how

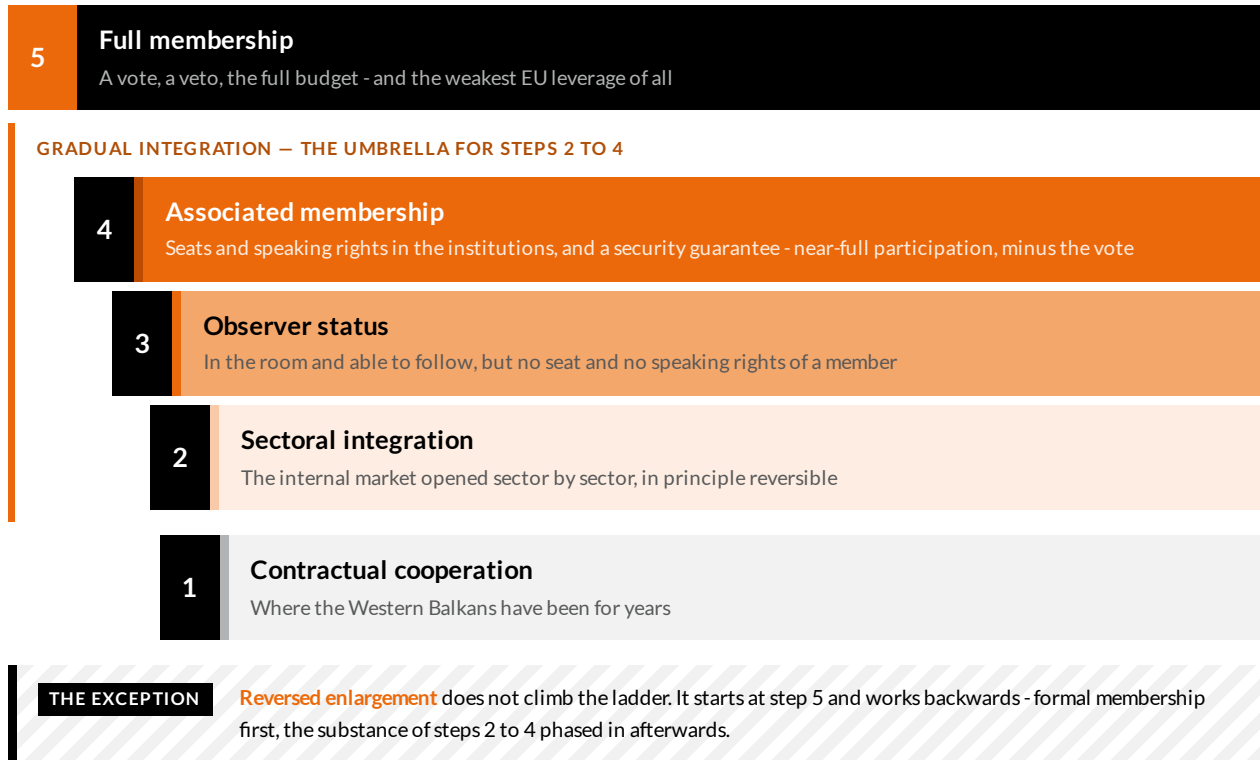
This dilemma lies at the core of the recent proposals put forward by EU institutions and Member States on how to innovate the enlargement process. **In March 2026, the European Commission informally introduced a controversial concept of "reversed enlargement"** - a fast-track model under which a candidate country (primarily Ukraine) would become a formal EU member first, while being gradually integrated into EU policies, institutions, and funds thereafter. While the suggestion was rejected by the EU Member States, the enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos called on the governments to come up with their own proposals² on how to advance the process. Simultaneously, the Commissioner repeatedly referred to the need for a system of safeguards³ designed to protect the Union and new members against democratic and rule of law backsliding after accession.

Over the following few months, three non-papers and a separate proposal by German Chancellor Merz emerged, injecting new ideas into the debate on how to dynamise the process and how to ensure a smooth widening of the bloc. The goal of this analysis is to examine each of these proposals, particularly from the perspective of democratic conditionality, and assess their implications for strengthening the rule of law and democracy in the candidate countries.

FIGURE 1 • THE JARGON, DECODED

Five steps between cooperation and membership

Gradual integration, observer status, associated membership, reversed enlargement: the debate has produced a vocabulary faster than it has produced agreement. Most of these terms describe a rung on the same ladder, distinguished by what a country gains and by how much leverage the Union keeps. **Gradual integration is the exception** - it is not a rung but the umbrella approach for how steps 2 to 4 are implemented, covering sectors, institutions, policies and funds alike.



Compiled by EUCRTA from the four 2026 proposals and the Commission's informal concept. Steps 2 to 4 are not a formal sequence in EU law - they describe how the current proposals stack up against each other.

Chancellor Merz's proposal of associated membership for Ukraine

German Chancellor Merz's proposal for an "associated membership"⁴, presented to Ukraine and to EU institutions in May 2026, represents a strong political signal meant to integrate Ukraine (and, to some extent also other candidate countries) practically into the EU immediately while the accession process leading to formal membership continues in parallel.

Although it calls for an immediate opening of all negotiation clusters with Ukraine, the proposal rests on the assumption that the country's process towards joining the EU will likely be lengthy, despite the security situation requiring a more immediate and innovative solution. Thus, rather than waiting until all formal accession conditions have been fulfilled, **the proposal seeks to establish an early form of Ukraine's political and institutional integration with the EU ("associate membership") that would gradually evolve into full membership in the Union** and help accelerate the accession process.

A particularly innovative aspect of the proposal is its elaboration of early institutional participation. This constitutes a new element that has so far been largely absent from the existing gradual integration approach, apart from occasional references and proposals advanced primarily by think tanks and the expert community. Together with the proposed security guarantee, based on a political commitment by Member States to extend the application of Article 42 paragraph 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) to Ukraine, early institutional participation is presented as one of the key added values of the associated membership model. The Merz letter proposes concrete mechanisms, such as Ukrainian participation in Council meetings, the position of an Associate Member of the European Commission or Associate Members of the European Parliament, and an Associate Judge at the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU).

The proposal foresees a step-by-step application of the *acquis*, subject to Council approval. From a financial perspective, the proposal envisages a gradual access to EU's direct management funds (meaning those administered by the European Commission and its agencies), linked to progress in the accession negotiations. However, **additional benefits offered in this area may be relatively limited**, as Ukraine already participates in the vast majority of EU programmes under direct management.

Although the proposal is centred on Ukraine as a special case, the letter to EU institutions also addresses the Western Balkans and Moldova. It proposes early integration measures, such as privileged access to the EU's internal market, enhanced sectoral integration, and advanced institutional integration. For the Western Balkans specifically, the letter mentions the possibility of granting observer status in all relevant EU institutions, alongside joint meetings with representatives of the European Commission and the European Parliament.

Democratic conditionality perspective

While the letter does not provide details of the conditionality provisions attached to the associate membership, it does appear to treat benefits granted under the model as reversible (referred to as a snap-back mechanism or sunset clause in relation to Ukraine) in the event of backsliding on the fundamentals or significant structural reversals in the accession process.

A key question, however, concerns the leverage the EU would retain if Ukraine or other candidate countries already enjoyed access to a significant share of benefits associated with full membership. In this respect, the proposal leaves open important questions regarding the effectiveness of conditionality throughout the remainder of the accession process - **what would be the incentive for candidates to continue with difficult reforms if they already enjoy the benefits of access to the EU's internal market, programmes and institutions?** The proposal appears to assume that institutional participation itself should serve as an incentive stimulating further reforms and alignment with the EU *acquis*. This might not, however, constitute a strong enough motivation unless combined with meaningful financial conditionality and credible mechanisms for withdrawing benefits in cases of backsliding.

That being said, **advanced institutional integration of the candidates could generate a positive socialisation effect**. By participating in EU institutions before full accession, especially if involved in bodies such as the Court of Justice of the EU, candidates could become more familiar and more deeply embedded in the EU's decision-making processes, administrative practices and political culture. Such participation could potentially facilitate not only their eventual transition to full membership but also the internalisation of European norms and values.

FIGURE 2 · A SEAT BEFORE MEMBERSHIP

Who would sit where, and with what rights

Early institutional participation is the genuinely new element in the 2026 enlargement debate - until now it had been advanced primarily by think tanks rather than governments. The Franco-German non-paper also mentions institutional integration, but Chancellor Merz's letter is the only proposal that lists concrete ideas, and it offers Ukraine and the Western Balkans two very different things.

Council of the EU Where member states legislate and decide UKRAINE Participation in Council meetings, with speaking rights PARTICIPATES, NO VOTE WESTERN BALKANS Possible observer status in all relevant EU institutions OBSERVER	European Commission Proposes legislation, manages funds, assesses progress UKRAINE An Associate Member of the European Commission ASSOCIATE SEAT WESTERN BALKANS Joint meetings with European Commission representatives JOINT MEETINGS
European Parliament Co-legislator, and the EU's directly elected chamber UKRAINE Associate Members of the European Parliament ASSOCIATE SEATS WESTERN BALKANS Joint meetings with European Parliament representatives JOINT MEETINGS	Court of Justice of the EU Interprets EU law and binds every member state to it UKRAINE An Associate Judge at the Court of Justice of the EU ASSOCIATE SEAT WESTERN BALKANS Not proposed NOT PROPOSED
Security guarantee Not an institution, but the other headline offer in the same letter UKRAINE A political commitment by member states to extend the application of Article 42(7) TEU, the mutual assistance clause, to Ukraine POLITICAL COMMITMENT WESTERN BALKANS Not proposed NOT PROPOSED	

WHY IT MIGHT WORK

Advanced institutional integration could generate a positive socialisation effect. By sitting inside EU institutions before accession - and especially inside the Court of Justice - candidates would become embedded in EU decision-making, administrative practice and political culture, which could help them internalise European values rather than merely comply with rules.

WHAT OBSERVER STATUS WOULD ACTUALLY MEAN

Unclear. Read broadly, "possible observer status in all relevant EU institutions" would include observer status in the European Parliament and potentially in the agencies or the Commission - bodies in which Western Balkan countries can in some cases already participate fully or as associated members. The German chancellor does not appear to have specified what it intends in practice.

WHY IT MIGHT NOT

The letter appears to treat institutional participation itself as the incentive for further reform. That may not be strong enough without meaningful financial conditionality - and it leaves open what leverage the EU retains once a candidate already enjoys a significant share of the benefits of membership.

All figures in this graphic come from Chancellor Merz's May 2026 proposal, the only document that lists concrete institutional roles. The Franco-German non-paper also mentions institutional integration, as one area of its toolbox, and invites the Commission to elaborate it; the Friends of the Western Balkans non-paper (May 2026) advocates phased institutional participation without specifying the phases. Compiled by EUCRTA.

Franco-German non-paper: a new momentum for enlargement

The non-paper introduced by France and Germany⁵ shortly before the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Tivat in June 2026 identifies two key dimensions in which the enlargement process should evolve. **First, it advocates for streamlining and simplifying the accession process** by removing unnecessary procedural hurdles, for example by merging certain procedural steps. **Second, it seeks to provide stronger incentives for reforms through a more developed gradual integration approach**, allowing candidate countries to benefit from closer integration before full membership.

The non-paper further elaborates on several new ideas for gradual integration, particularly in the area of the EU's internal market access, participation in EU programmes, and participation in EU institutions. These incentives are presented as part of a more structured "toolbox", with access clearly and directly linked to the fulfilment of accession criteria and progress in formal accession negotiations. At the same time, the paper stresses that gradual integration incentives should be tailored to each candidate country. To operationalise this approach, the governments invite the European Commission to present concrete proposals for advancing gradual integration.

Democratic conditionality perspective

An important safeguard included in this proposal is the principle that gradual integration "should build on the progress made in the accession process and be reversible in case of backsliding in the reform process and with regard to the EU core values and principles". However, beyond this reversibility principle, the paper offers relatively little detail on the broader question of democratic conditionality.

Similarly, **the call to open all negotiation clusters for which the European Commission has issued a positive recommendation would, in practice, also imply opening of Cluster 3 with**

Serbia. This would represent a return to a rather technocratic understanding of the accession process, centred on the fulfilment of technical benchmarks rather than a horizontal focus taking into account progress on the fundamentals which is increasingly present under the revised enlargement methodology.

Ultimately, the devil lies in the details. **The proposal does not specify what exactly constitutes backsliding in the reform process, nor how such backsliding would be assessed, or which criteria would trigger the suspension or reversal of gradual integration benefits.** For example, it remains unclear whether democratic backsliding identified by the European Commission (as was the case in the EC's 2025 Serbia country report) would automatically trigger the suspension or withdrawal of integration measures.

More fundamentally, integration into technical policy areas, and particularly into the EU's internal market, cannot rely solely on the fulfilment of technical criteria under individual negotiating chapters. Such integration must go hand in hand with broader progress throughout the accession process, including compliance with rule of law requirements and continued alignment under Cluster 6 (external relations). These fundamentals are equally important for safeguarding the integrity and functioning of the Single Market, including its resilience to interference and economic or political influence from external adversaries such as Russia and China. Comparisons with EEA and cooperation with other non-EU members, such as Norway or Iceland, fall short when confronted with their different contexts - in the case of EEA or EFTA countries, a key pillar of the cooperation is trust in their legal and political systems, as well as a substantial foreign policy alignment with the EU.

Non-paper on post-accession safeguards led by the Netherlands

The non-paper signed by Benelux countries, France and Germany⁶, builds on the acknowledgement that enlargement is a geostrategic investment for the EU and that the current political momentum should be maintained and translated into concrete results. It reflects on the changed geopolitical situation and evolution of the Union since previous rounds of enlargement, and proposes adapting future accession treaties to contemporary challenges.

The non-paper also argues that enlargement needs to strengthen both the Union and the security of its neighbourhood, thereby helping to build political and public support for accepting new members. Enlargement should therefore go hand in hand with the EU's own internal reforms aimed at safeguarding the Union's capacity to act and uphold its fundamental values, including by strengthening its rule of law toolbox.

To achieve this, the document proposes developing a general template for future accession treaties and a catalogue of safeguard options from which measures could be selected, tailored and complemented depending on the circumstances of each acceding country. Rather than prescribing a fixed model, the non-paper suggests considering the full range of available options (putting all options on the table) and initiating an open discussion on the most appropriate steps.

The underlying message is clear: the EU must enlarge, but it must do so in a way that strengthens rather than weakens the Union.

The proposal is structured around four main components. First, it builds upon existing sectoral safeguards and transitional measures from previous enlargement rounds. Second, it introduces additional safeguards to protect the EU's fundamental values under Article 2 TEU. Third, it explores options to safeguard the Union's capacity to act, particularly with regard to its decision-making capacity. Finally, it proposes safeguards against conduct that runs counter to the principle of sincere cooperation under Article 4 TEU.

With regard to existing safeguard clauses, the non-paper suggests both expanding their scope and prolonging the duration of mechanisms used in previous enlargements. This includes broadening safeguards to areas such as internal security, resilience against foreign interference and economic security, as well as building on previously introduced transitional periods related primarily to the labour market and access to EU funds, including the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Policy. It also envisages a monitoring mechanism linked to the implementation of the EU acquis, potentially with more intensive monitoring in the immediate post-accession period. While this idea seems to be developed primarily in relation to the free movement of workers, it could equally be extended to other key areas (including the fundamentals).

The proposal recognises that the Union needs stronger instruments to address any backsliding on EU values, particularly the rule of law, quickly and effectively. **The paper therefore proposes dedicated post-accession non-regression and safeguard clauses allowing the EU to adopt protective measures in the event of serious shortcomings or backsliding by a Member State in upholding EU values, including the rule of law, democratic principles, and media freedom.** At the same time, it argues that the conditions for invoking such a safeguard should be clarified, together with the range of measures that could be adopted, such as the suspension of cooperation in specific policy areas. **Unlike previous safeguard clauses, these mechanisms should also remain applicable beyond the traditional three-year post-accession period.**

The non-paper furthermore suggests discussing the possibility of temporary deviations from certain procedural rules under Article 7 TEU. In parallel, the paper argues that the Rule of Law Report should be further developed as a practical monitoring instrument and proposes that participation in the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO) should become a precondition for EU accession, serving as an additional safeguard for the rule of law. It also underlines that Schengen accession should remain a separate process, with a robust rule of law track record remaining a fundamental prerequisite.

With respect to the EU's capacity to act, the non-paper emphasises that internal EU reforms should proceed in parallel with enlargement. It also raises the possibility of introducing **temporary limitations on the voting rights of new Member States**, particularly in policy areas subject to unanimity, as a means of safeguarding the Union's decision-making capacity during the initial post-accession period.

Finally, the proposal argues that accession treaties should explicitly recall the obligation to respect the principle of sincere cooperation under Article 4 TEU and should consider introducing mechanisms to address conduct that undermines this principle, thereby protecting the Union's ability to function effectively.

FIGURE 3 · ANATOMY OF THE MOST DEVELOPED PROPOSAL

What the EU would keep in its hands after a country joins

Of the four proposals, only the Dutch-led non-paper signed by the Benelux countries, France and Germany focuses on the period after accession. Rather than prescribing a fixed model, it proposes a general template for future accession treaties and a catalogue of safeguard options to be selected from and tailored country by country. Its four components are explained below.

The underlying message is blunt: **the EU must enlarge, but it must do so in a way that strengthens rather than weakens it.** Enlargement is framed as a geostrategic investment, to be accompanied by the Union's own internal reform and a stronger rule of law toolbox.

1

Existing safeguards, broadened and prolonged

Building on the sectoral safeguards and transitional measures used in earlier enlargement rounds

- ≡ Broadening the safeguards to new areas: **internal security, resilience against foreign interference** and **economic security**
- ≡ Building on transition periods used before, applied primarily to the **labour market** and to **access to EU funds**, including the Common Agricultural Policy and Cohesion Policy
- ≡ A **monitoring mechanism** tied to implementation of the EU acquis, potentially more intensive in the period immediately after accession
- ≡ Developed mainly with the free movement of workers in mind, but equally extendable to other key areas - including the fundamentals

2

Protecting the EU's fundamental values

Article 2 TEU: the rule of law, democratic principles and media freedom

- The core of the paper, and the reason it matters most from a democratic conditionality perspective. It recognises that the Union needs stronger instruments to address backsliding on EU values quickly and effectively.
- ≡ Dedicated post-accession **non-regression and safeguard clauses**, allowing the EU to adopt protective measures where a member state seriously backslides on EU values, the rule of law, democratic principles or media freedom
 - ≡ **Acknowledging the need to clarify the conditions for invoking** such a safeguard, and the range of measures available, such as suspending cooperation in specific policy areas - the paper itself does not provide that clarification, it says it is needed
 - ≡ Unlike previous safeguard clauses, remaining applicable **beyond the traditional three-year** post-accession period
 - ≡ Discussing the possibility of **temporary deviations from the procedural rules under Article 7 TEU**, the procedure that has proved slow and politically hard to use
 - ≡ Developing the **Rule of Law Report** into a practical monitoring instrument rather than an annual stocktake
 - ≡ Making participation in the **European Public Prosecutor's Office** a precondition for EU accession, as an additional safeguard for the rule of law
 - ≡ Keeping **Schengen accession a separate process**, with robust rule of law performance a continuing prerequisite

3

Safeguarding the Union's capacity to act

Keeping a larger EU able to decide



The EU's **internal reform should proceed in parallel** with enlargement, not after it



Temporary limitations on the voting rights of new member states, particularly in policy areas requiring unanimity, as a way of protecting decision-making during the initial post-accession period

This is the proposal's sharpest edge: a new member would join the table without the full weight of a vote.

4

Sincere cooperation

Article 4 TEU: the obligation to act in good faith towards the Union



Accession treaties should **explicitly recall the obligation** of sincere cooperation under Article 4 TEU



Introducing **mechanisms capable of addressing conduct that undermines that principle**, protecting the Union's ability to function effectively

THE LIMITATION

These safeguards would apply **only to newly acceding member states**, creating a form of differentiated or two-track membership. That raises questions of fairness, and leaves relatively limited additional leverage for addressing rule of law backsliding among *existing* member states.

EUCRTA

Further work on post-accession safeguards has to go hand in hand with the broader debate on EU internal reform and on strengthening rule of law instruments that apply to all member states. Robust monitoring, non-regression principles and enforceable consequences for violating EU fundamental values should ultimately bind the whole Union, not only its newest members.

Compiled by EUCRTA from the non-paper signed by the Benelux countries, France and Germany, led by the Netherlands, June 2026.

Democratic conditionality perspective

Overall, the Benelux non-paper presents a comprehensive and comparatively detailed proposal, placing particular emphasis on strict safeguards and mechanisms to address potential democratic backsliding, as well as other internal threats to the Union. **Compared with the other proposals discussed, it offers the most developed framework for post-accession conditionality and protecting the Union against potential risks arising after enlargement.**

At the same time, one important limitation remains: **the proposed new safeguard mechanisms would apply only to newly acceding Member States, thereby potentially creating a form of differentiated or two-track system of membership.** Imposing additional constraints exclusively on newly acceded countries, while maintaining relatively limited leverage for addressing rule of law backsliding among existing Member States, creates a risk of undermining the principle of equality among members and, potentially, the political legitimacy of the enlargement process itself. Thus, it is crucial that further work on the post-accession safeguards and additional conditionality for new members goes hand in hand with the broader discussion about the EU's internal reform and the strengthening of rule of law instruments applicable equally and effectively to all Member States.

Friends of the Western Balkans non-paper on the advancement of gradual integration

The non-paper⁷ focuses on strengthening the gradual integration approach as both an incentive for reforms and a means of enhancing the European Union's geoeconomic position and strategic autonomy. Rather than treating gradual integration as an ad hoc measure, **the proposal argues that it should become a more systematic instrument within the enlargement process**, rewarding reform progress while simultaneously strengthening the EU's geopolitical and economic resilience.

The non-paper places particular emphasis on gradual integration into major sectors of the EU's Single Market. Such integration should remain merit-based and, where necessary, proceed gradually, depending on the level of alignment with the EU acquis. The proposal identifies a wide range of areas in which accelerated sectoral integration could be pursued. These include the full implementation of Green Lanes; accelerated integration into the energy and electricity markets, the Digital Single Market, and the transport and logistics sectors; participation in the EU's competitiveness and industrial strategies, as well as the critical raw materials policies; implementation of the Agreement on Conformity Assessment and Acceptance of Industrial Products (ACAA); the extension of Authorised Economic Operator (AEO) status to candidate countries; and measures facilitating youth mobility.

At the same time, the proposal extends beyond the Single Market and also advocates for deeper gradual integration in other policy areas, most notably the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and through phased institutional participation.

To operationalise this approach, the non-paper calls on the European Commission to present concrete proposals for sectoral integration into the Single Market. It also invites the Commission to clarify procedures for assessing whether a candidate country has reached a sufficient level of preparedness in the relevant negotiating chapters, as well as the safeguards that could be activated in the event of significant setbacks.

Democratic conditionality perspective

Overall, **the proposal remains relatively vague on the design of its conditionality framework**. While it states that access to the Single Market should be granted once a candidate country has demonstrated a high level of alignment with the relevant sectoral acquis as well as “robust and credible” implementation of the rule of law, it provides little detail as to what exactly this should mean in practice. It is also not clear from the proposal how these conditions would be assessed, monitored or enforced in practice, or under what circumstances safeguards would be triggered. Compared with the other proposals, the approach therefore appears rather technical and pragmatic, focusing primarily on expanding opportunities for sectoral gradual integration while leaving many of the key institutional and conditionality questions unresolved.

FIGURE 4 • FOUR PROPOSALS, COMPARED

What each enlargement proposal actually does

Since March 2026, one Commission concept and four government proposals have set out how to speed up EU enlargement. They agree on the destination and diverge sharply on the safeguards.

■ Central element, developed
 ■ Present but thin
 ■ Not addressed
 ■ Not applicable

	Reversed enlargement European Commission, informal March 2026 REJECTED BY MEMBER STATES	Associated membership Chancellor Merz, Germany May 2026	New momentum for enlargement France and Germany, non-paper June 2026	Post-accession safeguards Benelux, France, Germany, non-paper, Dutch-led June 2026	Advancing gradual integration Friends of the Western Balkans, non-paper May 2026
Primary addressee	Ukraine	Ukraine, with measures for the Western Balkans and Moldova	All candidate countries	All future member states	Western Balkans
Faster, simpler procedure	Sequence inverted	All clusters opened at once	Steps merged and hurdles removed	Not addressed	Through sectors, not procedure
Internal market access before membership	Sequence inverted	Privileged access for the Western Balkans	Core of the incentive toolbox	Not addressed	Most detailed sectoral list
Institutional participation before membership	Sequence inverted	Associate seats and observer status	Named in the toolbox, not elaborated	Not addressed	Phased participation, unspecified
Access to EU funds before membership	Phased in after joining	Only for Ukraine, limited added value	Further integration into EU programmes	Transition periods, not early access	Part of the sectoral package
Benefits reversible if a country backslides	Not developed	Snap-back mentioned, not detailed	Principle stated, criteria missing	Non-regression and safeguard clauses	Safeguards for major setbacks, to be concretised by the EC
Safeguards after accession	Implicit in the design only	Not addressed	Not addressed in this paper	Four components, most developed	Not addressed
Democratic conditionality: how developed	Weakest	Thin. Relies on institutional integration and socialisation	Reversibility only, risks technocratic drift	Strongest, but only for new members	Vague

Assessment by EUCRTA, based on the texts of the four proposals and the Commission's informal concept. Labels describe how far each document develops a given element, not whether the idea is good.

Conclusion

The renewed geopolitical urgency of EU enlargement creates a strong case for accelerating the process and offering candidate countries greater access to EU policies, markets and institutions already prior to full membership. However, faster and more flexible integration must not come at the expense of democratic transformation, in order not to risk eroding the very fundamental principles and functioning of the Union while potentially having adverse effects on democracy and stability in its closest neighbourhood. On the contrary, to exercise the transformative power of enlargement, **the more benefits candidates receive before accession, the stronger and more enforceable democratic and rule of law conditionality must become.**

Gradual integration needs to remain firmly tied not only to technical alignment with the *acquis*, but also to demonstrable progress on democracy, the rule of law and other fundamentals.

Reversibility must be credible, underpinned by clear benchmarks and concrete consequences for backsliding that can be applied swiftly and efficiently. Otherwise, frontloading the membership benefits risks reducing the EU's leverage and weakening the transformative power of the accession process. After more than a decade of stagnation, the enlargement process needs to be accelerated, but not at the expense of democracy and the rule of law, either within the EU or in candidate countries.

Reversibility must be credible, with concrete consequences applied swiftly.

Crucially, **strict conditionality cannot end at the moment of accession.** The EU needs effective mechanisms to prevent and respond to democratic and rule of law backsliding after membership has been achieved. Yet stronger safeguards should not create a permanent distinction between new and old Member States. Robust monitoring, non-regression principles and enforceable consequences for violations of EU fundamental values should ultimately apply consistently to all Member States.

The objective should therefore be a continuous system of democratic conditionality spanning the entire integration process - before, during and after EU accession. **A larger Union will only be a stronger Union if these standards are credibly enforced across the EU as a whole.**

FIGURE 5 • THE CENTRAL TRADE-OFF

The more a candidate gets before joining, the stronger conditionality has to be

Each proposal offers candidate countries some benefits prior to full membership. What differentiates them is whether the conditions attached to these gradually advancing benefits can keep pace, and ensure the EU maintains strict conditionality throughout the process. Compared against each other, most of the current proposals sit significantly below the line of balance between benefits and conditions.



1 Reversed enlargement European Commission, informal, March 2026, rejected	2 Associated membership Chancellor Merz, Germany, May 2026
3 New momentum for enlargement France and Germany, June 2026	4 Advancing gradual integration Friends of the Western Balkans, May 2026
5 Post-accession safeguards Benelux, France and Germany, Dutch-led, June 2026	

Positions are EUCRTA's reading of the five documents, not a measured index. They express how much each proposal frontloads the benefits of membership relative to how precisely it defines the conditions, the assessment and the consequences of backsliding.

FIGURE 6 • STAGES WHERE EACH PROPOSAL APPLIES

Conditionality has three moments. No single proposal covers all of them

Democratic conditionality can bite before a country joins, at the moment the accession treaty is written, and after membership is in place. Laid out across those three moments, the proposals divide neatly: four focus on the road to accession, one centres on what happens once a country is inside.

	1 Before accession the negotiating process	2 At accession the treaty itself	3 After accession membership in place
Reversed enlargement Commission, informal, March 2026, rejected	—	Membership granted first	Phasing in, never designed
Associated membership Chancellor Merz, Germany, May 2026	Deepest pre-accession integration	—	—
New momentum for enlargement France and Germany, June 2026	Streamlining plus an incentive toolbox	—	—
Advancing gradual integration Friends of the Western Balkans, May 2026	Sectoral single market integration	—	—
Post-accession safeguards Benelux, France, Germany, Dutch-led, June 2026	EPPO as a precondition	Treaty template and safeguard catalogue	Non-regression clauses and monitoring
EUCRTA's position	A continuous system of democratic conditionality, spanning the entire integration process - before, during and after accession. And after accession, applying to all member states, not only the newest ones.		

Assessment by EUCRTA, based on the texts of the four proposals and the Commission's informal concept.

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

New dynamism in the EU enlargement debate: implications for democratic governance and rule of law conditionality. Published September 2026.

The analysis is EUCRTA's. It examines one informal concept introduced by the European Commission in March 2026 and four proposals tabled by member states between May and June 2026: Chancellor Merz's proposal of associated membership for Ukraine, the Franco-German non-paper on a new momentum for enlargement, the non-paper on post-accession safeguards led by the Netherlands and signed by the Benelux countries, France and Germany, and the Friends of the Western Balkans non-paper on the advancement of gradual integration.

The six figures are EUCRTA's own reading of those documents. Where a figure scores or ranks the proposals against each other, that scoring is an assessment and not a measured index, and the figure says so.

