



## ANALYSIS

# THE STATE OF EU ENLARGEMENT AT THE OUTSET OF 2026

ON THE BRINK OF MAJOR BREAKTHROUGHS

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>CFSP</b>	Common Foreign and Security Policy
<b>MFF</b>	multiannual financial framework
<b>TEU</b>	Treaty on European Union
<b>TFEU</b>	Treaty on the functioning of the European Union
<b>QMV</b>	qualified majority voting

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## INTRODUCTION

The Commission's 2025 Enlargement Package documentation, published in November, followed exactly the same model as in preceding years, with its encyclopaedic reviews of the state of progress by each candidate state under all the 33 chapters of the formal enlargement process. In this paper, we set out our own summary review of this essential material. We note that the long enlargement train now, at long last, sees its first wagons advancing, with Montenegro singled out for the decision to begin preparation of a Treaty of Accession. At the end of the train, the Georgian wagon has been disconnected by its chief passengers.

Alongside the EU's heavily formalised and bureaucratised process, other developments of the highest geopolitical importance impinge on the formal enlargement track.

The most important has been the attempts by President Donald Trump to mediate a peace between Russia and Ukraine, showing both bias in favour of Russia and ignoring Europe's vital concern over the outcome. This has led to desperate attempts by key EU member states and the UK to shape up a European position on a peace agreement that could be acceptable to both Ukraine and Europe. This is a challenge for which the EU has institutionally been woefully underprepared, resulting in a proliferation of ad hoc arrangements seeking influence.

These developments have been going on outside and parallel to the enlargement process, with complex political and institutional implications for the EU. The emerging security arrangements, notably under the Coalition of the Willing, involve most but not all EU member states, plus the leadership of the EU's institutions, and several non-EU states.

Yet there is still a big link between the formal accession process and the war in Ukraine, which is reflected in the 'geostrategic' argument in favour of enlargement, and which may explain the new designation by the EU of Montenegro and Albania, with Moldova and Ukraine, as 'key enlargement partners'.<sup>1</sup>

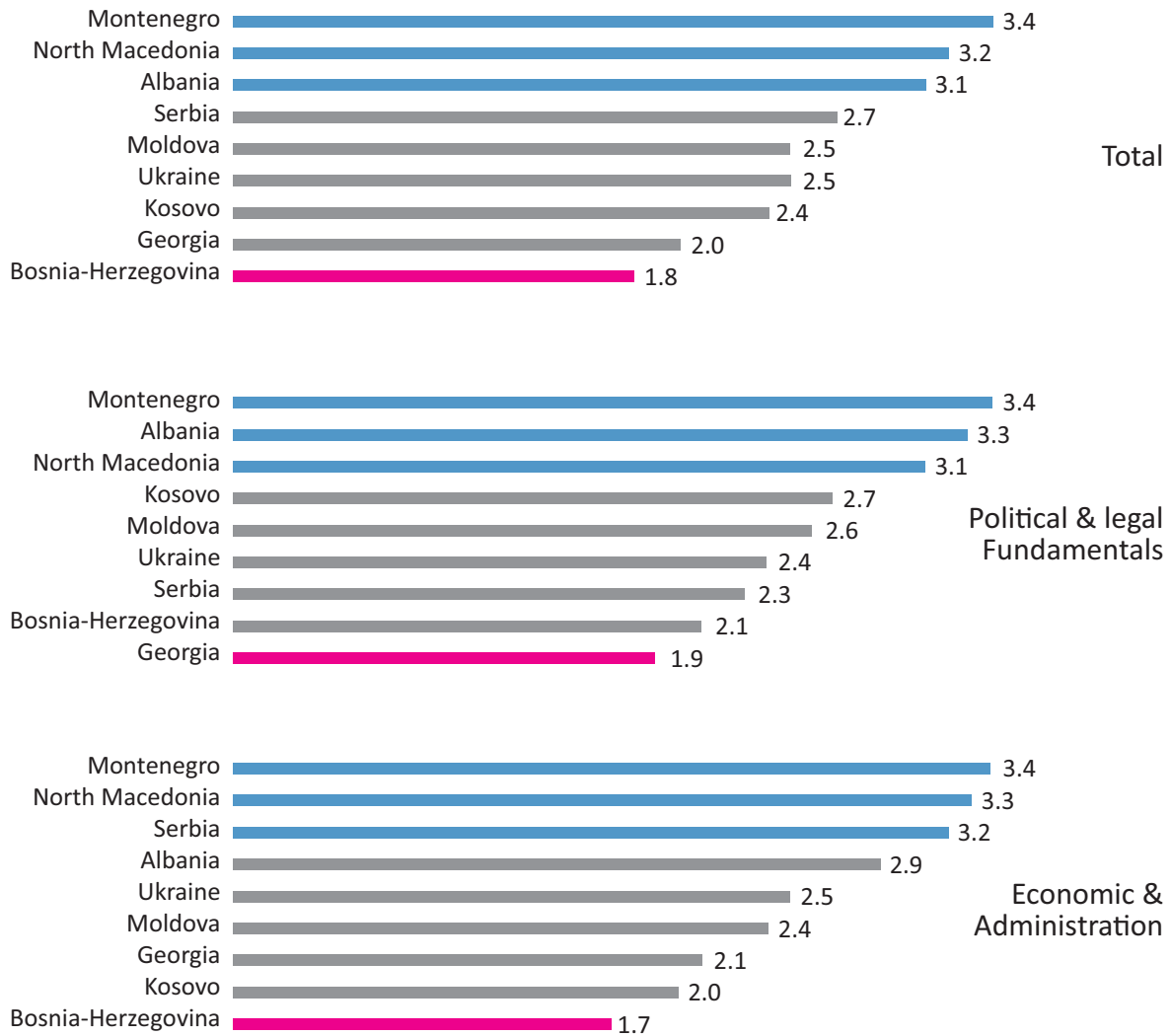
Further linked to this geopolitical priority is an enhanced concern over the veto-blocking powers of member states, which are still applied at every small intermediate step in the enlargement process. However, the December 2025 meeting of the European Council revealed interesting innovations (as detailed below, in Section 2) over how to circumvent such blockages without changing formal

*Ukraine's accession on 1 January 2027 would necessitate a drastic overhaul of the enlargement process and give new meaning to the concept of EU membership*

voting rules. Going even further, one version of the US-led peace proposals for Ukraine has introduced the idea of its accession to the EU on 1 January 2027.<sup>2</sup> This would necessitate a drastic overhaul of the enlargement process and give new meaning to the concept of EU membership. The European Commission has been jolted into action to allow for this eventuality. We offer our own ideas as to how this might be achieved (Section 3). But first, in Section 1, we summarise where the conventional enlargement process has got to for all the candidates.

<sup>1</sup> European Council, "[European Council, 18 December 2025](#)," European Council, Council of the European Union, 18 December 2025.

<sup>2</sup> While the full text has not been published, it has been widely reported in the media, for example: Antonina Langford, "[Ukraine Could Join EU by January 2027 Under US-Backed Peace Plan](#)," *Kyiv Independent*, 12 December 2025.



**Figure 1.** 2025 Scorecard of candidates’ level of preparedness for accession.

Source: Authors’ own computations in Table 1.<sup>4</sup>

## 1. ADVANCES, STAGNATION, AND RETREAT

The enlargement process now breaks down more precisely into four categories: (1) the frontrunners (Montenegro and Albania) and runners-up (Moldova and Ukraine), which together are called by the Commission the ‘key enlargement partners’; (2) those stagnating at different levels of preparedness, with lingering political issues preventing progress (North Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina); (3) the backslider (Serbia); and (4) the outsiders (now the geographically contiguous Türkiye and more distant Georgia). The most spectacular contrast of the recent past has been between Montenegro, whose

accession fairly soon seems now assured, with the EU beginning to prepare a Treaty of Accession, and Georgia, whose government has effectively withdrawn its application for membership.

Figure 1 presents our numerical reading on a scale from 1 to 5 of the assessments made by the Commission in its new 2025 Enlargement Package of documents, published on 3 November 2025, with our adaptation of the Commission’s methodology explained in Annex A.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Enlargement Package 2025, see: European Commission, “2025 Enlargement package shows progress towards EU membership for key enlargement partners,” European Commission, Press Release, 4 November 2025.

<sup>4</sup> For the content of the two sub-headings (political, legal and economic, administrative), see Annex B.

	UA	MD	GE	AL	BiH	KOS	MNE	NMK	SRB
<b>Political &amp; legal fundamentals</b>	2.4	2.6	1.9	3.3	2.1	2.7	3.4	3.1	2.3
Democracy	2.8	3.1	2.6	3.5	2.1	3.5	3.3	3.5	2.2
Rule of law & rights	2.0	2.0	1.3	3.0	2.0	1.8	3.5	2.7	2.5
<b>Economics &amp; administration</b>	2.5	2.4	2.1	2.9	1.7	2.0	3.4	3.3	3.2
Economic criteria	1.7	1.7	2.5	3.0	1.3	1.7	3.5	3.5	3.7
Public procurement, statistics	2.0	2.0	2.1	3.0	1.7	2.2	3.3	3.2	3.2
Internal market	2.3	2.4	2.0	2.7	2.1	2.3	3.5	2.9	3.3
Competitiveness	2.7	2.6	2.7	3.3	1.5	2.3	3.5	3.4	3.5
Green agenda	2.5	2.4	1.7	2.5	1.6	1.8	3.3	3.0	3.1
Agriculture, cohesion, budget	2.4	2.4	1.9	2.4	1.2	1.6	2.8	2.8	2.6
External relations	4.0	3.5	1.7	4.0	2.0	2.0	4.5	4.0	3.0
<b>Total, Political + Economic*</b>	2.5	2.5	2.0	3.1	1.8	2.4	3.4	3.2	2.7
<b>Total progress 2024 to 2025</b>	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2	–	0.2	0.3	0.1	0.1
<b>Number of improved chapters<sup>5</sup></b>	7	18	6	7	0	5	14	2	4
<b>Years to hit 4 at 2024 to 2025 speed</b>	5	5	10	5	–	8	2	8	13

\*Simple average of the Political and Economic headings.

Blue marks progress in 2025 over 2024. Pink marks regress in 2025 over 2024. No colour shading means that there was no change in 2025 over 2024.

**Table 1:** Summary ratings 2025. *Source:* Authors' own computations as in Annex A, with some re-arrangement of the headings as explained.

Neither the Commission nor the Council are willing to say what level of preparedness is to be required for accession – an unfortunate lack of transparency. For our part, we assume that a 'good' level of 4 will be required, this being broadly the level at which chapters are being closed. In terms of the merits-based approach, Montenegro is indeed in the lead with a score of 3.4, closely followed by North Macedonia and Albania.<sup>5</sup>

last year, and in December 2025 saw the closure of 5 more chapters, with a total now of 12 out of 33. While Albania improved its ratings for a respectable 7 chapters, the Council decided unanimously on 17 November 2025 to open all remaining chapters, thus delivering an encouraging message. Only Montenegro and Albania now have all chapters opened, and both are being seen as front-runners.

*Neither the Commission nor the Council are willing to say what level of preparedness is to be required for accession*

The largest number of candidates in the total summary ratings is in the region of 2: Serbia, Ukraine, Moldova, Kosovo, and Georgia (in that order), leaving Bosnia and Herzegovina alone in the bottom category under 2.

In the 2025 Enlargement Package, more progress is reported than in many years. This can be ascertained from the number of chapters reporting improvements in their ratings (Table 1 and Annex B).

Montenegro improved its ratings for an impressive number of chapters (14) over the

A striking achievement is that of Moldova with the biggest number (18) of chapters improving, i.e., over half of all, albeit from a low base, implying an effective whole-of-government priority to deliver. This exceptional performance of Moldova raises the intriguing question of whether it can sustain this rate of progress and, if so, join the front-runners. Ukraine also made improvements in 7 chapters, which is especially notable given that this was achieved under extremely difficult wartime conditions. However, Ukraine's international reputation suffered in 2025 with the resurgence of controversy over high-level corruption. Nonetheless, both Moldova and Ukraine have been grouped with Montenegro and Albania by the EU as 'key enlargement partners'.

<sup>5</sup> This compares the 2025 ratings with those of 2004.

For Serbia (4) and Kosovo (5), lower numbers are reported. For Serbia, this is linked to the deepening political polarisation reflected in ongoing student demonstrations, with backsliding reported over freedom of expression (this is only one of several components of Chapter 23 and, as a result, not visible in Annex B). Both Serbia and Kosovo are criticised for failing to fully implement agreements reached in the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. After fresh elections on 28 December 2025, Kosovo overcame the protracted political stalemate over forming a government after the February 2025 vote.

Two cases show no or very little improvement: Bosnia-Herzegovina and North Macedonia, respectively. For Bosnia-Herzegovina, this reflects the continuing dysfunctional nature of its constitution and practical governance; it remains the least prepared of all candidates. North Macedonia, on the other hand, continues to score high in the ratings but is stagnating. This reflects the return in 2024 of a nationalist government that is unwilling to continue the reform process initiated by its predecessor to comply with the demand by the European Council to include the Bulgarian community in the constitution as a basic condition for progress in the accession process.

Georgia withdrew its candidate status alongside the backsliding of the rule of law and rights chapters 23 and 24. The Commission now views Georgia to be a candidate ‘in name only’.

Four candidate states, which the Commission calls ‘key enlargement partners’, have declared their objectives for completion of accession negotiations in terms of target dates: 2026 for Montenegro, 2027 for Albania, and 2028 for both Ukraine and Moldova.<sup>6</sup> Given the general reservations in the past about mentioning any dates for future accessions, it is remarkable that the Commission has acknowledged that both Montenegro and Albania are ‘on track’ to reach these objectives, while for Ukraine and Moldova, this could also be the case if they

accelerate reforms. The other candidates have not declared target dates, which is realistic in view of their performances. Actual accession following agreement of the treaties of accession and their ratification would probably take two more years, which is precisely what the last case of Croatia needed.

Our own assessment is that these target dates may be somewhat on the optimistic side if the regular enlargement procedures continue to be followed, with Montenegro maybe needing one more year, and Albania, Moldova,

*The target dates may be somewhat on the optimistic side if the regular enlargement procedures continue to be followed*

and Ukraine between two and more years.<sup>7</sup> However, maybe the more credible prospect of accession will get the adrenaline flowing in governments, parliaments, and private sectors to move faster. On the other hand, the ratification round for the next accession treaty(ies) may well take longer, given the rise of Euroscepticism in some member states.<sup>8</sup>

There is also the question of whether the EU itself will be ready for these timetables. In March 2024, the Commission published a first superficial assessment.<sup>9</sup> Embarking on her second mandate, President von der Leyen promised in-depth reviews of the necessary adaptations of internal policies and governance required by further enlargement within 100 days from the start of the new Commission. More than 300 days in, the 2025 Enlargement Package said that the reviews would come ‘soon’. The reason for these delays partially lies in the difficult negotiations with member states on the EU’s next multiannual financial framework (MFF 2028–34) and the policy adaptations needed, notably in agriculture and cohesion, to integrate Ukraine and, to a

<sup>7</sup> This assumes continuation of the rate of progress registered in 2025 over 2024, as recorded in the bottom lines of Table 1, in order to reach an overall rating of 4.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the French Constitution prescribes either a 3/5 majority in the parliament or a simple majority in a referendum.

<sup>9</sup> European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews*, COM(2024)146 final, (European Commission, 20 March 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, “[2025 Enlargement Package shows progress towards EU membership for key enlargement partners](#),” European Commission, 4 November 2025.

lesser extent, the smaller economies of the other candidate countries. More worryingly, however, is that there is at present no sign of active political debate around the institutional adaptations needed to make the EU's governance system more efficient and effective, like the mainstreaming of qualified majority voting (QMV) and the question of whether and how to reduce the number of Commissioners (cf. Article 17 of the Treaty on European Union, TEU). Seen through this lens,

*There is at present no sign of active political debate around the institutional adaptations needed to make the EU's governance system more efficient and effective*

it is hard to understand how the Commission can objectively endorse candidates' target dates for closing negotiations if the terms of the fourth Copenhagen criterion on the EU's own 'absorption capacity' remain unclear and undecided.

Warnings of the hazards of enlarging without adequate measures to ensure the sound functioning of the institutions are not new. Indeed, as Devuyst points out in a timely paper, it has been 500 years since Machiavelli explicitly laid out these hazards in amazingly relevant language: "One should never expand unless one can afford it, that is, unless one can rely on an adequate domestic institutional arrangement and appropriate military means."<sup>10</sup>

## 2. CIRCUMVENTING UNDUE VETO BLOCKAGES

Nobody contests that the major enlargement decisions – for opening a candidacy, agreeing on the terms and conditions of a Treaty of Accession, and ratifying it – require unanimity. The issue is how urgently to prevent the veto blocking of political decisions, in general, and

more specifically, the financial support for Ukraine.

At the more systemic level, there is the need for a constructive procedure for responding to a possible veto blocking of a Treaty of Accession by a single member state. Equally, there is a need for a consensual formula for the case where a candidate meets the standards required for accession but suffers from an unresolved conflict with a third party beyond its control (as in Russia's war in Ukraine and Moscow's support for the Transnistrian region of Moldova).

In this regard, the end of 2025 saw important ad hoc developments. The President of the European Council has taken to adopting official European

Council conclusions on behalf of variable numbers of member states pragmatically without recourse to formal voting, thus avoiding veto blocking. Multiple steps along these lines were taken by the European Council in rapid succession on 18 December 2025 to exclude blockers from preventing conclusions on enlargement, and on Ukraine in particular, at the level of:

- 26 member states supporting the (Danish) Council Presidency's conclusions on enlargement, without Hungary because of its opposition to Ukraine,
- 25 member states supporting European Council conclusions on enlargement, in this case without Hungary and Slovakia, and
- 24 member states supporting the European Council's agreement to legislate the €90 bn loan to Ukraine under the Enhanced Cooperation mechanism, while excluding Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia from repayment obligations.<sup>11</sup>

The third case above goes way beyond the political declaratory content of the first two,

<sup>10</sup> Youri Devuyst, "[The European Union's 'Machiavellian moment' – Enlargement and the risk of overstretch](#)," *Relações Internacionais*, Special Issue, "Enlargement and the future of the European Union" (December 2025): 136-148.

<sup>11</sup> The Enhanced Cooperation mechanism, established under Article 20 of the Treaty on European Union, can authorise action agreed by at least nine member states, with decision-making rules detailed in Articles 326 to 334 of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union (TFEU). The decision to launch an action under Enhanced Cooperation still requires unanimity of member states (Article 329 TFEU), while the action has to remain open for the participation of any member state at any time (Article 328 TFEU).

mobilising massive funding of existential importance for the survival of Ukraine's Europe-oriented regime. It is also marking out a flexible precedent of considerable future value, contrasting with the current stagnation of attempts to extend qualified majority voting. The steps taken on 18 December reveal an effective combination of wide-ranging declaratory conclusions by the European Council and supporting legislative action under 'Enhanced Cooperation'.

Still, these important developments do not respond to the possible need to overcome a single veto of an accession, either for the conclusion of accession negotiations or for ratification of a Treaty of Accession. For this eventuality, the present authors have recently published a proposal on which what follows is based.<sup>12</sup>

The Commission would build on the data they already publish in the Enlargement Package documents and expedite the enlargement procedure on its own administrative initiative, without the need for the voting of decisions by the Council. There is no legal basis for the Council to impose a unanimity requirement on intermediate steps in the process between the opening of negotiations and their conclusion.

More precisely, there would be an improvement to the system as follows. First, there would be a simple technical improvement to quantify the 5-level qualitative ratings and to calculate averages with plausible weights, as done in this paper (Annex A).

Second, more political, the Commission would state the level of ratings that, in its judgement, is to be expected for accession. As mentioned above, a 'good' or 4 rating would seem to fit with revealed practice, since this is the level that seems to accompany the closure of chapters.

Third, and most fundamental, as and when a candidate reaches the required ratings, the Commission should propose a Treaty of Accession, designating the candidate as a 'Nominated Member State'. The treaty would be put to the vote in the Council, and if

unanimity is attained, ratification would proceed by following the constitutional requirements in the member states. If, however, some member state vetoed the proposed treaty, or its ratification, the candidate would retain Nominated Member State status, giving it full access to the policies and funding of the EU but limiting its participation in the institutions to only observer status in the decision-making of the Council and Parliament.

This mechanism could also be used for the Moldova–Transnistria type case mentioned above, where there was general support for the candidate's accession, blocked only by an unresolved territorial conflict beyond its control because of the malign influence of an external power.

To work against this temporary status from becoming permanent, the Commission would table the motion again in the General Affairs Council at periodic intervals, for example after two years, to put political pressure on any government(s) holding out and to check if a veto blockage could be lifted.

These proposals would also amount to a radical simplification of the enlargement process, which has become over-bureaucratised by the member states in the Council, and would be entirely consistent with the Commission's new priority to simplify EU regulations and procedures.

The proposals require no treaty change, but rather that the Commission exercises its existing core institutional function, namely to propose policy initiatives and, in this case, to implement the mandate given to it by the Council to negotiate the terms of membership with candidate countries. There is currently some loose debate in European circles about the possibility of accession without veto powers, which we believe to be legally feasible under EU law only as a temporary derogation.<sup>13</sup> Our proposal above is (as far as we know) the only full presentation of such ideas in an operationally specified and politically constructive form.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Emerson and Steven Blockmans, "[How to radically simplify and streamline the EU enlargement process](#)," *CEPS Policy Brief*, 18 September 2025.

<sup>13</sup> See: Steven Blockmans, [The legality of a temporal suspension of veto rights for new EU Member States](#), Policy Report (CEPS-CEP, 4 July 2023).

### 3. ULTRA FAST-TRACK FOR UKRAINE (AND SOME OTHERS)?

Russia's war in Ukraine and the US-led attempts to devise a peace have stirred up efforts in Europe to shape up a say for itself. At the organisational level, there has been a profusion of geometrically variable formats outside the EU framework, reflecting the triple needs for inclusiveness in a coalition of the willing, alongside exclusion of blockers, and compact leadership. One can speculate whether these successive formats are pragmatically pointing towards the makings of a future European Security Council, albeit with no formal and institutionalised shape yet apparent.

While not denying these new dynamics, they do not answer the issues posed by the spectacular idea of admitting Ukraine to the EU on 1 January 2027, as floated in a press report as a “move backed by Brussels” and included by Ukraine in its Christmas draft of the US-led peace plan.<sup>14</sup> While there has been no official explanation of this idea, one can only suppose that it is intended as a big reward to Kyiv, sufficient for it to swallow other highly problematic parts of the deal, for example, territorial concessions.

In fact, the 20-point US peace plan backed by Ukraine is almost certainly going to be rejected by Moscow, given Putin's continuing speeches aiming at total victory. But the idea of ultra-fast accession for Ukraine has been launched – the cat is out of the bag – calling for an official EU elaboration on how this might be enabled, for which our own proposal is advanced below.

Our assessment is that a target date for closing EU accession negotiations, let alone allowing

Ukraine to enter the EU in less than a year from now, is hugely optimistic if the current enlargement methodology is kept.

It took Croatia, the last country to join the EU, one year to negotiate its accession treaty and another two years to get it fully ratified. Given the fractious political landscape within and between member states, it may well take longer for the next accession treaty to get through all authorising environments (that of the acceding state, those of the 27 member states, and the European Parliament), even if Prime Minister Viktor Orbán loses power in the forthcoming Hungarian general election in April 2026. In France, where public support for EU enlargement stood at 35% in 2025 and where polls project a victory for the far-right Rassemblement National party in the next presidential election, either a 3/5 majority needs to be found in parliament or a simple majority in a referendum.<sup>15</sup> Even if a sustainable peace agreement is reached for Ukraine in early 2026, then 1 January 2027 is still a virtually impossible deadline to meet, provided the regular procedures are followed.

There would need to be a major change to the methodology to enable the January 2027 date to be met, building on but going beyond the ideas already discussed for circumventing undue veto blockages. The Commission now seems to have the task of squaring the circle, but little is known in public what ideas they are working on.

*Nominated Member State status could be granted to Ukraine on 1 January 2027 or very soon thereafter*

For our part, we could imagine the Nominated Member State proposal described above being adapted to this new challenge. Ukraine could be granted this status on 1 January 2027 or very soon thereafter, with specific settings of the required level of ratings of the chapters. These settings would be less than required

<sup>14</sup> Henry Foy, Christopher Miller, and Max Seddon, “Ukraine would join EU next year under draft peace plan,” *Financial Times*, 12 December 2025; Kateryna Denisova, Oleksiy Sorokin, “Zelensky reveals full 20-point peace plan draft backed by Ukraine, US,” *Kyiv Independent*, 24 December 2025; Seven senior officials from the EU and member states are quoted in this follow-up piece in the *Financial Times*: “EU ‘membership-lite’ plan for Ukraine spooks European capitals,” *Financial Times*, 16 January 2026.

<sup>15</sup> Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, “Majority of EU citizens support further EU enlargement, new Eurobarometer survey shows, while perception surveys in candidate countries point to overall support for EU accession,” European Commission, 2 September 2025; “Opinion polling for the 2027 French presidential election,” Wikipedia, accessed in January 2026.

for full membership, but at levels that would be realistic within the short time frame now being set. Given the geopolitical context, full alignment on the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) would be a prime criterion.

This designation would serve politically to entrench Ukraine's ambitions for full membership, at a time when so many destabilising events are happening on the world stage, notably with the Greenland crisis and its wider implications for both the EU and NATO. It would further spur on progress towards meeting the requirements for full accession.

The Nominated Member State regime would be building on the Gradual Integration mechanisms of the last two years, including the Growth Plans for the Western Balkans and Moldova, as well as the Ukraine Facility. Like for these Gradual Integration initiatives, there would be no need at this stage for a Treaty of Accession, with simpler decision-making by the Council. This proposal would amount to accession in two stages, drawing on ideas that have been broadly in circulation in recent years.<sup>16</sup> Fully-fledged EU membership would only come after negotiations on all accession chapters have been closed and when the terms of membership laid down in the Treaty of Accession have been endorsed in all ratification procedures.

The proposal does not undermine enlargement but, conversely, enlarges the concept of EU membership by structuring it in two stages. Talk of 'second-class membership' is ill-founded since the whole process remains geared towards achieving full membership of aspirants.

Accession to those EU policy domains that are at present held back until after accession (Eurozone, Schengen, the European Public Prosecutor's Office, Permanent Structured Cooperation in defence) would continue as now, requiring their respective high-level and binding commitments to be credibly met.

But for the new model to work, there can be no room for favouritism or double standards: it cannot just be applied to Ukraine and must be made available to all candidate countries who meet the requirements. Moldova would be quick to request the same status. North Macedonia would be eligible if the new

*For the new model to work, there can be no room for favouritism or double standards*

government wanted to renew its membership drive. The present front-runners, Montenegro and Albania, might well prefer to continue on the traditional accession procedures, given how fast these have been advancing. If that were their choice, so be it. On the other hand, the geopolitically misaligned candidates (Serbia, Georgia, Türkiye) would not be eligible, since the prime requirement for the Nominated Member State would be full alignment of the CFSP. For the same reason, Bosnia and Herzegovina would not currently meet the required standards. Kosovo's progress on the gradual integration track, and thus accelerated Nominated Member State status, is conditioned on the normalisation process with Serbia.

## CONCLUSION

In the last year, there was notable progress with four candidate states – Montenegro, Albania, Moldova, and Ukraine, which were designated 'key enlargement partners' with recognised target dates for the conclusion of negotiations. For Montenegro, preparations of the Treaty of Accession are expected to begin. There were also notable steps taken by the European Council to bypass veto blockages of measures to aid Ukraine.

But then, towards the end of December 2025, there was a bombshell story in the media that Ukraine would become a member state by 1 January 2027. This had been inserted in the 20-point draft peace plan agreed by Ukraine with the US. It has not been transparent in public to what extent the EU had been party to this drafting. But according to press reports, it seems that the Commission has been tasked to find a way for this to be made possible.<sup>17</sup> The

<sup>16</sup> Milena Mihajlović, Steven Blockmans, Strahinja Subotić, and Michael Emerson, "[Template 2.0 for Staged Accession to the EU](#)," CEPS, 23 August 2023.

<sup>17</sup> "EU 'membership-lite' plan," *Financial Times*.

implicit logic of this dramatic proposal seems to be that it was required to give Ukraine a big win, to make easier acceptance of very difficult compromises on other issues, for example, territory.

If this is the case, the next question for the EU is how to adapt the traditional rules of the enlargement process to enable very early accession for Ukraine, even if a bit later than 1 January 2027. It is not known what the Commission may propose. For our part, into this empty space, we outline a 2-stage accession to membership, building on recent developments under the heading of gradual integration (the Ukraine Facility, Growth Plans for the Western Balkans and Moldova).

Stage One would be based on the Nominated Member State proposal, adapted to the new context of ultra-rapid accession, at least for Ukraine, while also attracting Moldova and maybe others – the proposal should be open to all candidates. This status would

enable maximum progress towards all the requirements for full membership with a regular Treaty of Accession as Stage Two,

*Stage One would be based on the Nominated Member State proposal, adapted to the new context of ultra-rapid accession with a regular Treaty of Accession as Stage Two*

starting, however, at realistic levels of ratings for individual chapters and clusters. Final institutional provisions – a Commissioner and full voting rights – would be held back until Stage 2.

There is now a rare opportunity to rewrite the rules underpinning the long and arduous enlargement process and introduce much-needed flexibility. Doing so would send a powerful geopolitical signal that the EU stands by democratic countries who are willing to reform, and against neo-imperialist tendencies of rivalling autocracies.

## ANNEX A. METHODOLOGY

### QUANTIFICATION OF THE LEVEL OF RATINGS

The Commission’s qualitative ratings in its Enlargement Package documents are translated into numerical ratings as follows, where the levels of numerical ratings are based directly on the Commission’s qualitative ratings in the Enlargement Package documents, where:

Early stage of preparedness	1
Some preparedness	2
Moderate preparedness	3
Good preparedness	4
Advanced preparedness	5

### DEMOCRACY RATINGS

However, for democracy, the Commission provides only descriptive analysis, abstaining from giving any summary ratings, while citing the results of several independent surveys of democracy in an annex. Among these sources, Freedom House has two categories: political rights and civil liberties. Here, we use only the former – political rights – since this is a broad measure of democracy. On the other hand, the civil liberties heading covers a wide range of rule of law issues that are covered by the Commission’s sources under Chapters 23 and 24. Freedom House’s numerical ratings are expressed on a scale of 1 to 4, whereas the Commission’s has five levels. For Tables 1 and 2, the Freedom House 4-level numbers have been rescaled onto the Commission’s 5 levels; for example, a Freedom House rating of 2 becomes a rating of 2.5 (2x5/4).

### GROUPING AND WEIGHTING

In a first step, each chapter is given an identical weight in an average for its cluster. In a second step, the clusters are averaged separately for the political and economic groupings, respectively. This follows the distinction between the political and rule of law fundamentals of cluster 1, and the other clusters that are mainly economic and administrative. For the overall summary rating, cluster 1 is given the same weight as the average of all the other clusters. Thus, the political and the economic are given equal weights, even while there are many more economic chapters.

This follows the Commission’s methodology, but with some adjustments. Cluster 1 has been limited here to the most ‘fundamental’ elements, namely democracy and the rule of law. Other chapters in the fundamental cluster, such as statistics, have been placed in the economic/administrative grouping.

### DEGREES OF PROGRESS

In Tables 1 and 2, progress is registered with green coding when there is movement up in the five-level scale above (or red for downwards). The Enlargement Package documents also include a five-level evaluation of the rate of progress (1–Very good progress, 2–Good progress, 3–Some progress, 4–Limited progress, 5–No progress). We have not used this data since it adds further complexity without adding much value.

## ANNEX B. ENLARGEMENT PACKAGE 2025, CONVERTED INTO QUANTITATIVE RATINGS

	UA	MD	GE	AL	BiH	KOS	MNE	NMK	SRB
<b>Cluster 1 Fundamentals</b>									
<b>2.1 Democracy, public admin. (*)</b>									
2.1.1 Democracy	2.8	3.1	2.6	3.5	2.1	3.5	3.3	3.5	2.2
2.1.2 Public Admin reform	2.5	2	2.5	3	1.5	2	3	3	3
<b>2.2 Rule of law &amp; rights</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>2.5</b>
2.2.1 Ch 23 Judiciary, hum. rights	2	2	1.5	3	2	1.5	3.5	2.5	2.5
2.2.2 Ch 24 Justice, free., security	2	2	1	3	2	2	3.5	3	2.5
<b>2.3 Economic criteria</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>3.7</b>
2.3.1 Functioning market economy	2	2	3	4	1	2.0	3.5	4	4
2.3.2 Capacity to compete	1.5	1.5	2	2	1.5	1.5	3.5	3	3.5
<b>2.4 Public procur., stats., finance</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>2.2</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>3.2</b>
2.4.1 Ch. 5 Public procurement	2	2	2	3	2	2.5	4	3	3
2.4.2 Ch. 18 Statistics	2	2	2	3	1	2	3.5	3.5	3.5
2.4.3 Ch. 32 Financial control	2	2	2	3	2	2	4	3	3
<b>Cluster 2 Internal market</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>2.1</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>3.3</b>
Ch 1 Free movement of goods	3	3	2	2.5	1	2.5	3	3	3
Ch 2 Free movement labour	1	2	1	2.5	2	2	2	1	3
Ch 3 Services, establishment	2	2	3	3	1	3	4	3	3
Ch 4 Free movement capital	2.5	3	3	3.5	3	3	4	3.5	3.5
Ch 6 Company law	2	2	2	3	2	2	4.5	4	4
Ch 7 Intellectual property rights	2	3	2	3	3	3	5	3	4
Ch 8 Competition	2	2	1.5	2.5	2	2	3	3	3
Ch 9 Financial services	2	2	2	3.5	2.5	3	3.5	3	3
Ch 28 Consumer, health protection	2.5	2.5	2	1	1	1	3	3	3
<b>Cluster 3 Competitive etc.</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>3.4</b>	<b>3.5</b>
Ch 10 Digital, media	3.5	2	2	3.5	1	2	4	3	3
Ch 16 Taxation	2	2	2.5	3	2	2	3.5	3	3.5
Ch 17 Econ. & monetary policy	3	2	3	3.5	1	3	3	3.5	3.5
Ch 19 Social, employment	1	2.5	2	3	2	2	2.5	3	3
Ch 20 Industrial policy	2.5	2	3	3.5	1	3	4	3.5	3
Ch 25 Science, research	3	3	3	2.5	2	1	4	4	4
Ch 26 Education, culture	2.5	3	3	3.5	1	2	4	3	4
Ch 29 Customs union	4	4	3	3.5	2	3	3	4	4
<b>Cluster 4 Green agenda</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>2.5</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>1.8</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3.1</b>
Ch 14 Transport	2	2.5	2	2	2	2	3.5	3	4
Ch 15 Energy	4	3.5	2	4	1	2	4	3	3
Ch 21 Trans-European Networks	2	2	2	2	2	2	3.5	4	3.5
Ch 27 Climate, environment	2	1.5	1	2	1.5	1	2	2	2
<b>Cluster 5 Agri, cohesion, budget</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>2.4</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>2.8</b>	<b>2.6</b>
Ch 11 Agriculture	1.5	1.5	1	2	1	2	3	3	2
Ch 12 Food safety (SPS)	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	4	3
Ch 13 Fisheries	2	3	2	3	1	1	3	3	3
Ch 22 Regional	2	3	1.5	3	1	1	3	3	3
Ch 33 EU budget	1	1.5	1	2	1	1	2	1	2
<b>Cluster 6 External relations</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>
Ch 30 External relations	4	3	1	4	2	2	4	4	3
Ch 31 CFSP, defence	4	4	2.5	4	2	2	5	4	3
Number of improved chapters	7	18	6	7	0	5	14	2	4

\* The democracy line is brought alone into the summary Table 1 in the main text because of its fundamental importance. It is for this reason not averaged with public administration reform.

## ANNEX C. STATUS OF CANDIDATES WITH REGARD TO THE OPENING AND CLOSING OF CHAPTERS AS OF END-DECEMBER 2025

	Chapters Opened	Chapters Provisionally Closed
Montenegro	33	12
Albania	33	0
Serbia	22	2
North Macedonia	0	0
Bosnia & Herzegovina	0	0
Ukraine	0	0
Moldova	0	0
Georgia	0	0

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