

EU Enlargement Horizon: When Ambition Meets Veto

The European Commission presented its long-awaited pre-enlargement policy [review](#) on October 6, 2026. The package follows the Commission's March 2024 [communication](#) and the European Council's subsequent request for in-depth policy reviews. It addresses internal reform and the preparations required for future accessions. It also draws lessons from earlier enlargements, including the use of national vetoes to pursue bilateral disputes and the difficulty of responding to democratic backsliding after accession. The Commission proposes stronger safeguards for new members and changes to the way the EU takes decisions. The document offers grounds for cautious optimism, but important political questions remain. Will member states accept limits on their vetoes? How will Ukraine's integration affect the single market, the budget and the balance of influence in the Council? And can the Union prepare for enlargement while candidates carry out the reforms demanded of them?

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Enlargement and internal reform were among the issues discussed at the European Council in Brussels on October 15–16, 2026. The [conclusions](#) largely reaffirmed the principles set out in the 2023 Granada [declaration](#). Enlargement remains a geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity; both the EU and future members must be ready at accession; and each candidate must advance according to its own reform progress. Leaders noted the Commission's communication and asked the Council to analyze its proposals and move the work forward. This provides political direction, but it does not amount to agreement on the individual reforms.



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These debates also matter for Georgia and the EU's eastern neighborhood. Georgia retains candidate status, but its accession process has been effectively [halted](#) since 2024. Ukraine and Moldova, meanwhile, opened negotiating [clusters](#) 2 and 3 on October 13, 2026, building on the earlier opening of the fundamentals and external relations clusters. Opening negotiations is an important step, but it does not mean the required reforms are complete. The Commission has also announced indicative [roadmaps](#) for Ukraine, Moldova, Albania and Montenegro, conditional on continued reform momentum. These should guide preparations rather than guarantee accession on a fixed date.

Geopolitics and Merit Combined

The Commission presents enlargement as a geopolitical imperative while insisting that accession must remain [merit-based](#). The strategic need to strengthen Europe does not remove the obligation to meet membership conditions. Respect for democratic institutions, the rule of law and fundamental rights remains central, alongside alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The Commission also intends to extend the annual Rule of Law Report to further candidate countries as they become [ready](#). This is one lever the European Union has not applied to some candidate countries (like Georgia) for unclear reasons. Changing this pattern would be useful and provide a supplementary tool for the EU and civil society organizations in those countries to influence the policy-shaping process.

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One crucial feature of combining these two paradigms, the geopolitical imperative and the

merit-based process, would be avoiding incentive breakdowns. The risk remains that leaders of certain countries in the accession process might believe their states will be accepted into the EU regardless, for geopolitical and security reasons, which could reduce their appetite for reforms. The second risk is that accepting a country that is not fully ready for membership would import democratic backsliding into the European Union. The proposed remedy is gradual integration into the EU Single Market and its programs. This will be accompanied by strict conditionality.

Breaking the Vicious Circle

The European Union has often struggled to respond quickly to crises, and unanimity can allow a single government to hold up action in sensitive areas. Qualified majority voting (QMV) already applies to about 80 percent of the Council's legislative [work](#). The Commission proposes making greater use of existing treaty mechanisms to extend QMV in selected fields. These include sanctions, measures against tax fraud and fiscal measures in energy policy. Decisions with military or defense implications face a separate treaty [restriction](#) and cannot simply be moved to QMV through the foreign-policy passerelle clause.

The Commission also encourages constructive [abstention](#) under Article 31(1) of the Treaty on European Union. This allows a government to make a formal declaration that it will not apply a foreign-policy decision while accepting that the decision commits the Union. It therefore offers an alternative to a veto, subject to the treaty's limits.

For example, Hungary has frequently [applied](#) constructive abstention to avoid blocking EU military and financial support for Ukraine. However, the European Union must also appease some member states that want to keep the veto right. The Commission has therefore proposed to apply emergency brake provisions to social security systems for migrant workers, judicial cooperation, and common

rules for certain criminal offenses. The proposal also stresses that if several member states oppose the decision, debates at the Council level will continue until consensus is reached.

This is, in a way, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it would pave the way for the candidate countries, but on the other, keeping the country that carried out crucial, costly, and painful reforms at the door of the EU might bring huge disappointment to the people of that country and also cast a shadow on the credibility of the EU enlargement process.

For accession negotiations, the Commission recommends QMV for opening clusters and taking intermediate [decisions](#). This would reduce opportunities to block a candidate repeatedly during negotiations. Final admission would still require unanimity and ratification of the accession agreement by all contracting states under Article 49 [TEU](#). The proposal therefore addresses an important source of delay without removing the possibility of a final veto. This is, in a way, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it would pave the way for the candidate countries, but on the other, keeping the country that carried out crucial, costly, and painful reforms at the door of the EU might bring huge disappointment to the people of that country and also cast a shadow on the credibility of the EU enlargement process.

Drawing Conclusions From Past Experience

Bilateral disputes have repeatedly complicated enlargement. The Commission's 2009 enlargement strategy recorded that the Slovenia–Croatia border dispute prevented negotiating chapters from being opened or closed even when technical preparations were complete. More recently, European Parliament

delegation [minutes](#) identified relations with Croatia as an obstacle during Montenegro's December 2024 accession conference. These examples show how a member state can bring a bilateral disagreement into the accession process, creating additional political uncertainty for a candidate.

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The problem extends beyond those cases. North Macedonia's progress remains linked to constitutional amendments recognizing additional communities, including Bulgarians; the European Council president reiterated this [requirement](#) in June 2026. For the eastern candidates, Hungary's resistance to Ukraine's progress has likewise shown how vulnerable negotiations are to national political decisions. Moving intermediate steps to QMV could limit repeated obstruction. Yet the reform still requires political agreement, and an unresolved dispute could resurface when the accession treaty needs unanimous approval. The EU therefore needs a credible distinction between membership conditions and bilateral demands unrelated to those conditions.

A second lesson concerns democratic backsliding after accession. Hungary and Poland both became subjects of Article 7 [proceedings](#), illustrating how difficult it is to enforce EU values once a country has joined. Poland's procedure closed in 2024 after commitments and measures addressed rule-of-law concerns, showing that sustained EU pressure can also accompany a reversal of backsliding. The Commission now proposes an institutional [safeguard](#) in future accession treaties, available for 15 years after accession. In particularly serious cases, measures could include suspension of Council voting rights. They would follow a Commission proposal or a reasoned request by Member States and be deemed adopted unless rejected by QMV within a specified

period. This remains a proposal requiring agreement in accession treaties. It would complement existing Article 7 [rules](#), not change them automatically, and measures would remain subject to judicial scrutiny and regular review.

Gradual Integration

The Commission stresses that gradual integration should complement and reinforce the accession process. Earlier access to selected parts of the single market and EU programs is intended to reward preparation and help candidates build the capacity required for membership. The proposed [approach](#) links deeper integration to respect for EU values, implementation of relevant EU rules and strategic alignment, including alignment with the CFSP and sanctions. Access would depend on the conditions of the relevant instrument and could be adjusted where those conditions are no longer met.

Some of these benefits are already visible. Ukraine and Moldova joined the EU's [roaming](#) area on January 1, 2026, allowing users to call, text and use mobile data while traveling under the same conditions as at home, subject to the applicable rules. Financial support also links closer integration to reform. Moldova's EUR 1.9 billion [facility](#) for 2025–2027 releases funds after the Commission verifies agreed conditions, while the Western Balkans' EUR 6 billion [facility](#) for 2024–2027 combines grants and concessional loans with reform requirements. Such measures can make the accession process more tangible for citizens and businesses. They also give governments a reason to implement difficult changes before the final membership decision.

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The political risk is that gradual integration becomes a prolonged waiting room. A country may adopt EU rules and open its economy while remaining outside

the institutions that make those rules. To sustain support for reform, each additional benefit should therefore be linked to clear benchmarks and a credible route towards membership. The Commission's proposed annual dialogues could help assess progress and identify further opportunities, but they cannot resolve a political veto on accession. For Georgia, this means that closer economic links alone cannot replace restoring democratic standards and restarting the accession process. Gradual integration will strengthen the EU's influence only if both sides treat it as preparation for full membership.

Will It Fly At All?

The Commission has put forward proposals that could make enlargement more dynamic, but member states retain the decisive political role. The October European Council's request for further analysis keeps the process moving without settling the most contentious questions. Its [language](#) largely restates the principles agreed in Granada in 2023. The next test will be whether governments translate those principles into decisions on voting arrangements, safeguards and the terms offered to candidates. Further discussion may be necessary, but prolonged deliberation would weaken the momentum that the Commission seeks to build.

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The main question that remains is whether the EU can proceed with enlargement without changing the Treaty, applying the passerelle clauses and bypassing unanimity with QMV. Why is the EU, which sees enlargement as a geopolitical matter, not ready to change the treaty? It is also not guaranteed that EU member states would so easily give up voting rights for the sake of enlargement. The document also says little about the internal reforms of the EU and the reform of voting rights in the Council, since

the accession of Ukraine to the EU will shift the power balance at the Council eastward, and the Polish-Ukrainian axis, representing 15.5 percent of the population of the EU-29, can act as an anchor to set up blocking minorities. The European Commission does not provide an answer to the most pressing issue of dealing with Ukraine's agricultural sector and the allocation of cohesion funds. The European Commission also floats the idea of introducing transitional arrangements for the free movement of workers and services, agriculture, sensitive products, funding, and participation in common systems and networks. It seems the European Commission shied away from proposing the [same](#) 7-year transitional period (2+3+2 system) as for countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. This leaves room to think that EU leaders are considering longer transitional periods.

For Georgia, the central problem is the gap between formal candidate status and the absence of progress

towards negotiations. On October 12, 2026, the Foreign Affairs Council expressed grave [concern](#) about democratic backsliding, the situation of opposition parties and the implementation of foreign agents' legislation. A fuller discussion is expected in January 2027. Georgia nevertheless retains its formal candidate status. The Commission's [position](#) remains that progress depends on reversing the authorities' current course and implementing the necessary reforms. Meanwhile, Moldova and Ukraine opened the second and third negotiation clusters, meaning that more than 70 percent of negotiation chapters are open. They are also expecting to get the accession roadmaps with details and deadlines for the accession process, while Georgia remains a candidate country "on paper" only, and chances to catch up with Moldova and Ukraine vanish every day ■