

The European Commission outlines its concept for the EU's enlargement and internal reforms

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On 20 March, the European Commission adopted a communiqué which outlined its reform agenda and announced a review of EU policies in order to prepare the EU for the next enlargement, with the aim of ensuring that the upcoming accession provides an impetus for the EU's further economic growth and strengthens its position. The document analyses how the admission of new members would affect areas such as the EU's values, budget and policies, as well as its governance.

The communiqué is a general proposal from the Commission addressed to the European Parliament and the member states. It is designed to provide a framework for the discussions within the EU on the way forward for the EU's enlargement policy and internal reform in the context of the work on the new Strategic Agenda for 2024–29.

Commentary

- The document represents the Commission's contribution to the ongoing debate on the EU's future and the next enlargement; at the same time, it provides a summary of the discussion that has been ongoing since 2022. It signals some of the Commission's preferences in the context of the work on the Strategic Agenda for 2024–29. Specific recommendations for reforms in the EU will be made following a review of its policies and the publication of two reports: Enrico Letta's High-Level Report on the future of the Single Market, and Mario Draghi's Report on the future of European competitiveness.
- **The document describes enlargement as a strategic priority for the EU** that will strengthen its geopolitical position, bring economic, social and environmental benefits, and expand the zone of security, stability and democracy. The expanded membership of the EU is expected to reduce its external dependencies, strengthen its resilience and enhance its competitiveness and potential for growth. The document contains numerous (albeit quite general) arguments in favour of further enlargement, but it also stresses the primacy of protecting the interests of the EU's current member states. It also emphasises that internal reform of the EU is necessary for the next enlargement to take place, and that the two processes should run in parallel ('The EU must deepen as it widens').
- The Commission is pushing the concept of 'gradual integration', which France and Germany have supported, as well as the inclusion of the candidate countries in various forms of cooperation, which indicates that **it prefers** (or at least considers more feasible) **economic integration and regulatory harmonisation with these countries – while**

sidelining or at least postponing the issue of actual enlargement. Phasing in the candidate countries does allow them to adapt to the EU's rules of operation and standards more quickly; however, within this process, the Commission does not offer these countries any associated benefits that would encourage them to implement reforms (for example, it does not mention the possibility of granting them access to EU funds), which may have a discouraging impact on their efforts at reform. This effect will be even stronger as the Commission has rejected the possibility of establishing a timeframe or sequence for the admission of new members, arguing that the accession process depends on the performance of individual candidate countries.

- As a result the document presents a contradiction, in that it calls for rapid reforms in the EU (both to its institutions and individual policies) with a view to future enlargement while deferring the very issue of admitting new members to an unspecified future: certainly at least until after 2029, when the new Commission's term of office comes to an end.
- The Commission's document is consistent with the concept of multi-speed integration, both within the EU itself (different circles of integration) and with regard to the candidate countries (gradual integration) which has been put forward by the French-German reflection group. Hence it includes references to mechanisms such as enhanced cooperation, opt-outs and constructive abstention. Combined with the call for the gradual economic integration of the candidate countries, this raises the **risk that the EU's cohesion will be weakened.**
- The focus on existing treaty provisions as the basis for streamlining the EU's institutions indicates that the idea of revising the EU treaties has been abandoned in the short to medium term. In view of the prospect of further enlargements, pushing for such a solution would run the risk of failure and weigh on the image of Ursula von der Leyen and the European People's Party in those countries which are sceptical of deeper integration. This is why the Commission has made only general reference to the proposals to introduce qualified majority voting (QMV) that have come up in the debate; it assumes that those countries which are in favour of admitting new members will agree to this mechanism in the Common Foreign and Security Policy and fiscal policy if it is applied to enlargement policy.

APPENDIX. Key provisions of the Commission's concept for enlargement

1. The Commission emphasises that the **shared values** of democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights are the most important aspects for the transformation of the candidate countries as part of the enlargement process. It stresses that **reforms on so-called 'fundamental issues'**, as monitored through annual rule of law reports, **will be crucial for their progress in integration.** It highlights the harmonisation of their foreign policies with the Common Foreign and Security Policy and their active involvement in initiatives such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), the European Defence Agency and crisis missions/operations as an important measure of whether they share these common values.
2. The Commission calls for the **gradual integration** of the candidate countries, which implies their inclusion in various policies and institutions with a view to better preparing

them for accession. First of all, this involves gradually providing them with access to **the single market and the customs union**, which should allow the aspiring countries to integrate more quickly into the EU's value chains in sectors such as raw materials, batteries, tourism, the circular economy and machinery. The Commission stresses that the extent of access to the common market will depend on the EU's decisions and the progress made by the candidate countries in introducing reforms while taking into account the interests of both sides; it rules out *à la carte* integration that covers fields preferred by individual countries.

3. The Commission calls for such gradual integration to be applied in those areas where future enlargement will present the greatest challenges and can also deliver the greatest benefits to the EU. These include **connectivity, environmental and energy transition standards (including the Green Agenda), agriculture, maintaining social, economic and territorial cohesion, as well as security, migration and border management**. The Commission notes that the aspiring countries have already been included in various EU programmes and activities, and argues that it is therefore advisable to consider deepening this integration, including within the framework of the DCFTAs with Ukraine and Moldova, the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the Energy Community.
4. The Commission asserts that the potential enlargement provides an opportunity for a comprehensive review of **EU policies** in terms of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, while suggesting that some competences could be returned to the national level. It adds that enlargement can also result in greater coordination and/or harmonisation in certain areas (such as economic and fiscal policy, social security systems, labour law, consumer protection and occupational health and safety) to ensure social cohesion. The results of these reviews, along with recommendations for reforms, will be published sequentially in 2025.
5. The Commission assumes that the main challenge in the context of future enlargement will be posed by the **common agricultural policy** and the need to maintain the conditions of equal competition for current and future member states while respecting their different agricultural models. Problems will also arise in the area of cohesion policy.
6. The Commission emphasises that at present it is difficult to clearly assess the financial consequences of admitting new members and the impact of this process on the **EU budget**, as these will depend on the pace of reforms in the candidate countries and the outcome of the accession talks with them (the introduction of transition periods, etc.). At the same time, the Commission calls for **any possible increase in spending (and revenues) resulting from enlargement to be taken into account during the negotiations on the 2028–34 Multiannual Financial Framework**.
7. The Commission clearly signals that **it is necessary to reform the EU budget** by making it simpler and more flexible, and by adapting it to the new challenges that require joint investment and action, such as green and digital transformation and growing security threats. It is essential to review and modernise the policies in the areas of agriculture and rural development, cohesion, connectivity, and migration and border management, even if enlargement fails to materialise. The Commission's proposals also include reforming the system of the EU's own resources and increasing the contributions of those countries

that participate in the common market (EEA-EFTA-Switzerland).

8. The Commission stresses that its preferred model for institutional reform is to amend the treaties in order to allow for QMV to be introduced in tax policy and certain elements of social policy. **However, given the slim chances of such a reform, it calls for the use of the *passerelle* clause and/or the option of constructive abstention in all areas where this is possible. This not only applies to the above-mentioned areas, but also to the Common Foreign and Security Policy.** At the same time, it notes that the application of this clause will be linked to the possibility of blocking a decision if the vital interests of a particular country are at stake. The document proposes to introduce QMV for decision-making in the enlargement process, with the exception of decisions on closing individual chapters, which will still require unanimity.
9. The Commission also supports **differentiation** within the EU on the assumption that functioning within a wider group necessarily implies introducing various forms of enhanced cooperation between individual countries.