

OVERVIEW OF DIFFERENT EU ENLARGEMENT MODELS:

# THE QUEST FOR MEANINGFUL (INTERIM) GOALS

**Author: Adnan Ćerimagić**  
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The successful EU accession process relies on three key elements: first, a credible promise of membership in reasonable timeframe; second, comprehensive negotiations during which candidate countries align their legal frameworks with EU standards; and third, substantial financial and technical assistance aimed at supporting necessary reforms and convergence.



With eroding credibility of the promise of membership, several models aimed at adapting the three key elements have been proposed, including single market membership and staged accession. Each offered different pathways for closer integration with the EU.



None of the models have so far been fully accepted by the EU. The New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the Ukraine Facility Plan, flagship EU projects to be implemented from 2024 to 2027, have taken some of the elements from these models, offering increased funding in exchange for reforms, and partial integration with the EU single market.



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# THE THREE KEY ELEMENTS OF THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS

The accession process of the European Union (EU) has evolved since the first round of enlargement in 1973.<sup>1</sup> However, at its core, the process remains based on three key elements:

1. a credible promise of membership,
2. the actual process of negotiations, and
3. substantial financial assistance tailored to the specific needs of accession countries.

Under credible promise of membership, the first key element, is meant that any candidate can through its own efforts reach the attractive goal of EU membership within a reasonable timeframe. This promise has been a cornerstone of the EU's enlargement policy, providing candidate countries with a clear and attainable objective. In the case of the 2004 enlargement round, for example, EU member states committed themselves to be:

"in a position to welcome new Member States from the end of 2002 as soon as they have demonstrated their ability to assume the obligations of membership and once the negotiating process has been successfully completed.."<sup>2</sup>

This commitment was made in December 1999, less than two years after the majority of candidates started accession talks and four years before all ten joined the EU. The credibility of this promise proved crucial in motivating candidate countries to undertake necessary reforms and align their policies with EU standards.

Regarding the WB, the EU is still not ready to make similar commitments, although two candidates are negotiating for over a decade (Montenegro and Serbia).

Instead, EU member states chose to use euphemisms such as "full and unequivocal commitment to the EU membership perspective."<sup>3</sup>

The second key element is the actual process, better known as "negotiations," which includes bringing the legal framework of the country in accordance with EU legislation in all areas relevant for the functioning of the EU.<sup>4</sup> This involves setting up new or adapting existing institutions, and implementing all the EU policies, laws, and regulations. The negotiation process is comprehensive and covers a wide range of policy areas, including the rule of law, human rights, economic policies, and environmental standards. Each candidate country must meet these stringent requirements to ensure that they are fully prepared for the responsibilities and benefits of EU membership.

The third key element is substantial financial assistance and tailored support programmes, which, unlike classical development assistance, are specifically designed to help accession countries prepare for EU membership.<sup>5</sup> These funds are essential in supporting the reform processes and ensuring that candidate countries can meet the necessary criteria for membership. Financial assistance is often accompanied by technical support to help implement EU policies and build the institutional capacity needed for membership.

Debate on adapting the key elements of the accession process has been present since the first round of enlargement in 1973. This debate was mostly focused on improving the second and third key element, accession negotiations and financial assistance and tailored support programmes. But part of the debate was focused on the first key element, too.

<sup>1</sup> Wolfram Kaiser, Jürgen Elvert, "European Union Enlargement: A Comparative History", 2004.

<sup>2</sup> European Council, "Helsinki European Council, 10 And 11 December 1999, Presidency Conclusions", 11 December 1999. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/hel1\\_en.htm](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/hel1_en.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Council of the EU, "Council conclusions on Enlargement", 12 December 2023. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-16707-2023-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, "Steps towards joining", "Acquis", 2024. [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/steps-towards-joining\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/steps-towards-joining_en) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/acquis.html>

<sup>5</sup> European Commission, "Pre-Accession Assistance", 2024. [https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/pre-accessionassistance\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/pre-accessionassistance_en)

Ahead of the 1995 enlargement round, some in the EU argued against full membership for Austria, Sweden and Finland. With recognition of Turkey as an official candidate for EU membership in 1999, and offering of EU membership perspective to Albania and countries that emerged from the collapse of former Yugoslavia, in 2003, this debate picked up the pace.

In 2002 and 2004, for example, German and French politicians proposed a privileged partnership for Turkey.<sup>6</sup> This model aimed to put full membership off the table, reconciling increasing scepticism in the EU with Turkey's high expectations. In 2006, then German chancellor Angela Merkel floated the same model as a path for Croatia and the Western Balkans.<sup>7</sup> This idea was later abandoned both in the case of Turkey and Croatia/Western Balkans.

The debate on potential adaptations of the key elements re-opened and accelerated since 2018. The European Commission, in February 2018, adopted a strategic document which suggested that Montenegro and Serbia could be ready to join the EU by 2025.<sup>8</sup> Both Germany and France, key EU member states, rejected the idea of setting any concrete date.<sup>9</sup> Many other member states agreed. Since then the debate was pushed mostly by think tanks in the EU and the Western Balkans. During that time some proposals for adapting the key elements were rediscovered (Single Market/EEA model) while others were developed from scratch (Staged Accession). Their key aim, however, was identical: to fill the gap created in the first of the three key elements of the accession process, the lack of a credible promise of EU membership in a reasonable timeframe. The idea was that if the accession process would be spiced up with credible intermediate goal(s), reforms would accelerate, and funds/technical support would provide optimal results.

The EU institutions and decision-makers in member states did not stay indifferent to the debate. Confronted with slowing-down and even backsliding of EU-related reforms, everdecreasing influence in the region, and the need to make decisions on the start of accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, they produced their own proposals, most often in the form of the so-called non-papers (unofficial documents meant as basis for debate). While such proposals came from countries like France and Austria and the European Commission, others, including Germany, showed readiness to entertain different proposals.

This debate slowed down with adoption of the new methodology for EU accession process in 2020, and recognition of EU membership perspective for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia in 2022.<sup>10</sup> Also, in August 2023, Charles Michel, proposed 2030 as the year when the EU and candidates should be ready for enlargement.<sup>11</sup> Since then there is an increasing discussion of Montenegro joining the EU by 2028.<sup>12</sup>

While the debate on adapting the key elements calmed down, it is important to note that some elements of different models were incorporated in the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and the Ukraine Facility Plan, both to be implemented from 2024 to 2027.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, as some member states made a clear link between EU internal reforms and any future enlargement, if the EU is unable to address those internal issues, this debate might resurface again.

<sup>6</sup> Idris Turan, Ekrem Yasar Akcay, Selim Kanat, "Understanding Privileged Partnership Discourse on the Basis of Turkey and the European Union Relations", 2019. <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/773847>

<sup>7</sup> EU Observer, "Merkel moots 'privileged partnership' for Balkans", 17 March 2006. <https://euobserver.com/enlargement/21163>

<sup>8</sup> European Commission, "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans", 6 February 2018. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0065>

<sup>9</sup> Politico Europe, "Macron pours cold water on Balkan EU membership hopes", 17 May 2018. <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-pours-cold-water-balkans-eu-membershipenlargement/>

<sup>10</sup> European Commission, "Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans", February 2020. [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enhancing-accession-process-credible-eu-perspectivewestern-balkans\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enhancing-accession-process-credible-eu-perspectivewestern-balkans_en)

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<sup>11</sup> European Council, "Speech by President Charles Michel at the Bled Strategic Forum", 28 August 2023. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/08/28/speech-by-president-charlesmichel-at-the-bled-strategic-forum/>

<sup>12</sup> Financial Times, "Montenegro pushes for EU membership by 2028", 28 February 2024. <https://www.ft.com/content/ebf070db-ba9b-482f-a97f-33ae920c7cd8>

<sup>13</sup> European Commission, "New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans", 2024. [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/new-growth-plan-westernbalkans\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/new-growth-plan-westernbalkans_en)  
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## DIFFERENT MODELS

The following section provides an overview of the most debated models that have been proposed to reform the EU enlargement process. While this is not the extensive list, it is safe to conclude that other proposals include combination of those discussed here. This section also discusses the European Commission's New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, to be implemented from 2024 to 2027, and which has been inspired different proposals.

## PRIVILEGED PARTNERSHIP

Privileged partnership was first entertained in 2002, as a way to integrate Turkey into the EU framework without granting full membership.<sup>14</sup> It was championed by politicians and academics who opposed full membership for Turkey (2002 and 2004), Croatia, and the Western Balkans (2006).

This model was never developed in detail, but overall, it involved the customs union which would be extended into mutually advantageous areas like agriculture and services, as well as an observer status in most EU institutions, and introduction of consultative mechanisms.<sup>15</sup> In the case of Turkey, this model included also full integration into European defence, security, and foreign policy mechanisms with eventual full membership in relevant decision-making bodies.

With it the first key element of the EU accession process, full membership within a reasonable timeframe, was not offered. The second element, the negotiations, would then therefore focus on areas covered by it (customs union, policy areas of mutual interest). The third element, the financial/technical support was never explained in detail.

## SECTORAL INTEGRATION

This model involves integration between the EU and candidates in specific sectors based on special treaties. It was first done in the case of energy (2005) and most recently in transport (2017). The basic idea and focus on energy was proposed by think tanks in early 2000s.<sup>16</sup> This idea was then adopted and championed by EU institutions.

Key drivers behind this model were economic and developmental interests, and in the case of the transport area, also geopolitical interests (to counter increasing Chinese investments in transport infrastructure).<sup>17</sup>

While full membership in the EU within a reasonable timeframe is not offered in this model, it is important to note that it was never meant as a substitute for it. Instead, treaties establish separate institutions where the EU and candidates are represented equally. 'Negotiations' focus on alignment with EU legislation and standards in selected sectors, excluding the rule of law. Funding is provided via pre-accession funds, with some extra technical support focused on the specific sector.

Sectoral integration is designed to bring candidate countries into closer alignment with the EU in specific areas of mutual interest. This approach recognises that full membership may not be immediately attainable for all candidate countries but offers a pathway to closer integration. By focusing on specific sectors, such as energy and transport, sectoral integration aims to create tangible benefits for both the EU and the candidate countries.

<sup>14</sup> Die Zeit, Heinrich August Winkler, "Wir erweitern uns zu Tode", 13 November 2002.

[https://www.zeit.de/politik/eu\\_und\\_tuerkei](https://www.zeit.de/politik/eu_und_tuerkei)

<sup>15</sup> The New York Times, Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, "Preserving Europe : Offer Turkey a privileged partnership instead", 15 December 2004.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/15/opinion/preserving-europe-offer-turkey-a-privileged-partnershipinstead.html>

<sup>16</sup> European Stability Initiative (ESI), "Democracy, Security And The Future Of The Stability Pact For South Eastern Europe", 4 April 2001.

<https://www.esiweb.org/publications/democracy-security-and-future-stability-pact-south-eastern-europe>

<sup>17</sup> Energy Community, "Who are we", 2024.

<https://www.energy-community.org/aboutus/whoweare.html>

Transport Community, "About us", 2024.

<https://www.transport-community.org/about-us/>

## SINGLE MARKET

This model aims to introduce an interim goal on the road to full EU membership: the EU Single Market membership, including all four freedoms of movement.<sup>18</sup> It is based on the model of the European Economic Area (EEA), as well as the experiences of Austria, Finland, and Sweden, which first joined the single market and then the EU.

The proposal came from a think tank but was later accepted and championed by various politicians in the EU and the Western Balkans. Some described it as a motivating interim step, while others feared that if accepted it could become permanent solution for the EU integration of the Western Balkans. Full membership within a reasonable timeframe was not part of the initial proposal of this model. After 2022 it was adapted, and Single Market membership was presented as an alternative offer if by the time that candidates reach necessary level of reforms, the EU is not ready to welcome them as full members (read: EU does not finalise internal reforms).

Negotiations would under this model remain unchanged but they would focus on chapters relevant for Single Market membership, including the fundamentals, rule of law, democracy and economic criteria. Funding for the Single Market model is designed to support candidate countries both before and after they join the Single Market. Pre-single market membership funding would come from existing pre-accession funds, which would be slightly increased to support the necessary reforms. Once candidate countries join the Single Market, they would have access to funding levels comparable to those of full EU members. This funding structure would ensure that candidate countries have the resources needed to implement the necessary reforms and align their economies with the EU.

## STAGED ACCESSION

This model aims to provide a structured road towards full EU membership.<sup>19</sup> By breaking the accession process into four distinct stages, this model offers candidate countries a series of achievable goals that should help drive reforms and align their legislation, policies and institutions with EU legislation, standards and policies. Each stage is designed to reward progress along 33 chapters, with increased funding and access to EU institutions, creating an incentive for candidate countries to continue their reforms.

This model was proposed and developed by think tanks, and was seriously discussed by various EU governments and institutions. Some have seen it as a convincing template for full membership, while others feared it could turn some of the stages into a permanent solution. Full membership within a reasonable timeframe was possible as the goal, but this model did not include any concrete timeframe. Negotiations would remain the same, around clusters/chapters, but progress through stages would depend on improved preparedness across all chapters, with a special emphasis on the rule of law. This model included increased funding.

The four stages of Staged Accession provide a roadmap for candidate countries to follow. Each stage represents a higher level of integration with the EU, culminating in full membership. The “new member state” status is an innovative feature of this model, offering candidate countries significant benefits and access to EU institutions while they continue their path towards full membership. Funding for the Staged Accession model is designed to support candidate countries at each stage of their journey towards full membership. The level of funding ranges from 50 percent to 100 percent of what full EU members receive, depending on the stage. This funding structure is aimed to ensure that candidate countries have the resources needed to implement the necessary reforms and align their policies with EU standards. By linking funding to progress through the stages, this model aims to create a strong incentive for candidate countries to continue their reforms and move towards full membership.

<sup>18</sup> European Stability Initiative (ESI), “Offer the four freedoms to the Balkans, Ukraine, and Moldova”, 2024.

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<sup>19</sup> European Policy Centre, “The Initiative for a Staged accession to the EU”, 2024.

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## PHASING IN/ GRADUAL INTEGRATION

This model retains full membership as the goal but does not offer concrete timeframe for it, and with it accession negotiations remain unchanged. Its innovative aspect is that once candidates achieve the necessary level of preparedness within certain policy areas, chapters, and/or clusters, they receive more funding, observer status in EU institutions/agencies, and possible participation in the EU Single Market.<sup>20</sup> It has been proposed by the European Commission in 2020, and supported by EU member states. It is still unclear how exactly will it be implemented. It is a flexible and adaptive approach to the accession process, which recognises that candidate countries may progress at different rates in different policy areas. It allows for partial integration based on the level of preparedness. By providing benefits such as funding and observer status in EU institutions, this model aims to maintain the momentum of the accession process and supports candidate countries in their reforms.

## NEW GROWTH PLAN FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

The New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans is to be implemented from 2024 to 2027, and it is not designed as a separate and/or competing model of EU accession process.<sup>21</sup> It is, however, inspired by the Single Market and Staged accession models.

In its nutshell this plan offers extra funding and the opportunity for Western Balkans candidates to partially integrate with the EU Single Market in seven specific areas, including energy, transport, and the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA). Access to the 6 billion Euros of funding depends on implementation of the socio-economic and rule of law/ democracy reforms agreed with the European Commission and Council.

Access to selected areas of the Single Market depends on adopting relevant EU acquis and standards, partly conditioned on active participation in regional cooperation and integration.

While full membership within a reasonable timeframe is not part of this plan, it is also not meant to substitute it. Accession negotiations remain unchanged and run in parallel, with a separate negotiation process and reporting developed for this plan. By providing increased financial support, the plan aims to drive progress in implementation of reforms, and regain EU's influence in the region.

<sup>20</sup> European Commission, "Enhancing the accession process - A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans", 5 February 2020. [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ef0547a9-c063-4225-b1b4-93ff9027d0c0\\_en?filename=enlargement-methodology\\_en.pdf](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/ef0547a9-c063-4225-b1b4-93ff9027d0c0_en?filename=enlargement-methodology_en.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> European Commission, "New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans", 2024. [https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/new-growth-plan-westernbalkans\\_en](https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/new-growth-plan-westernbalkans_en)



## CONCLUSION

The EU enlargement process has evolved over time, but its key elements remain the same: a credible promise of membership in reasonable timeframe, a comprehensive negotiation process, and substantial financial and tailor made assistance.

Various models have been proposed to reform the key elements, including privileged partnerships, the Single Market, and staged accession models. Each of these models aims to offer a solution to the lack of one or several key elements.

While privileged partnership has been rejected, none of the other models has been either fully accepted or fully rejected by the EU. The Single Market and Staged Accession models have inspired some of the EU policies. Elements of the both models can be found in the phasing in/ gradual integration and the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans/The Ukraine Facility.

At the moment debate on alternative models seem to be off the table, but without credible promise of membership in reasonable timeframe, and linking of future EU enlargement with progress on the EU internal reforms, the debate on the future of the accession process will likely continue, and discussions on different models might return.

# ANNEX: OVERVIEW OF MODELS AND THE THREE KEY ELEMENTS

	1. Membership promise	<i>Instead</i>	2. Negotiations	3. Assistance
<b>Strategic partnership</b>	Not offered.	Customs Union extended into areas mutually advantageous like agriculture and services; observer status in most EU institutions; and introducing consultative mechanisms.	Limited to mutually beneficial areas.	Not explained.
<b>Sectoral integration</b>	Not addressed.	Model not meant as a substitute for full membership. Treaties establishing separate institutions in which EU and candidates are represented on equal footing.	Separate from membership negotiations process and focused on negotiating alignment with EU legislation and standards in selected sectors.	Provided via preaccession funds and some extra funding.  Not linked to success in reforms.
<b>Single Market</b>	Yes, but no concrete timeframe.	Full membership in the EU Single Market and its four freedoms as an interim step towards full membership in the EU. Partly create separate institutions in which EU and candidates would be equal participants, partly it would provide access to EU institutions without voting rights (modelled upon EEA/ Transport Community).	Accession negotiations would stay the same but would focus on chapters relevant for the membership in the EU Single Market, including the fundamentals: the rule of law, democracy and economic criteria.	Pre-single market membership: existing pre-accession funds, slightly increased Post-single market membership: access to funds comparable to that of full EU members.
<b>Staged accession</b>	Yes, but no concrete timeframe.	Introduction of four interim stages towards full membership, including introduction of “a new member state” status. Progress through four stages would be linked to the level of preparedness for EU membership, and each stage would be rewarded with access to more funds and EU institutions.	Accession negotiations would stay the same but progress through stages would depend on level of preparedness for EU membership being improved across all chapters, with special weight being given to the rule of law.	Depending on the stage, the level of funding would range from 50% to 100% of that what full members of the EU receive.
<b>Phasing in/Gradual integration</b>	Not addressed.	Full membership not the goal but it is in no way excluded. Within negotiations, when candidates achieve necessary level of preparedness for EU membership within certain policy areas, chapters and/or clusters, they are given more funding, allowed to sit in EU institutions/agencies as observers, and if/where possible be part of the EU Single Market.	Accession negotiations would stay the same but once the necessary level of preparedness for EU membership is achieved, candidates would get benefits.	Additional funds in policy areas, chapters and/or clusters where necessary level of preparedness for EU membership is achieved.

	1. Membership promise	<i>Instead</i>	2. Negotiations	3. Assistance
<b>New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans</b>	Not addressed.	Full membership not the goal but it is in no way excluded. It offers extra funding (6 billion euros) and opportunity for the Western Balkans candidates to partially integrate with the EU Single Market (seven specific areas: energy, transport, payment area, etc.). Access to the funding depends on implementation of with the European Commission agreed and by the Council approved list of socio-economic and rule of law/democracy reforms, tailor made for each candidate. Access to the selected areas of the Single Market depends on adoption of the relevant EU acquis and standards. Partly also conditioned with active participation in regional cooperation and integration.	Accession negotiations would stay the same and run in parallel. For the New Growth Plan separate negotiations process between the European Commission, Council and individual candidates, as well as reporting.	Extra 6 billion euros (2 billion grants and 4 billion cheap loans).

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