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EU Unpacked # 16

Dr George Robakidze

Preparing for a Wider Union: How the EU Plans to Make Enlargement Work

An In-Depth Analysis for Non-Experts

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Introduction

Every enlargement debate eventually arrives at the same question: can the European Union take in new members without weakening itself? For two decades the answer was postponed. Candidate countries were told to reform; the Union, for its part, was rarely asked to do the same. On 6 October 2026 the European Commission published its answer to the second half of that question, in a Communication titled [Preparing for a wider Union](#).

The document is easy to misread. Its title promises a grand design, and some readers — in Brussels and in the candidate countries alike — expected a geopolitical manifesto. It is nothing of the kind. It is a readiness paper: a technical assessment of whether the EU's rules, institutions and budget can absorb a larger membership, and what must change so that they can. Judged as a strategy for Europe's place in the world, it disappoints. Judged as what it is, it contains some of the most consequential proposals on enlargement in years. This issue of EU Unpacked explains why the Commission wrote it, what it proposes, and where its real strengths and weaknesses lie.

Part I — Why the Commission Wrote This Document

1. From the Granada Declaration to the Policy Reviews

The Communication is the end point of a process that began in 2023. In her State of the Union address that September, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called on the Union to match the determination of the enlargement countries and announced a set of **pre-enlargement policy reviews**. A month later, EU leaders adopted the **Granada Declaration**, which set out a simple principle: candidates must reform, and the Union must undertake its own internal preparations in parallel.

The Commission turned that principle into a work programme in March 2024, covering four areas — values, policies, the budget and governance. In June 2024 the European Council adopted a roadmap for internal reforms and asked the Commission for in-depth reviews in those four areas. The October 2026 Communication responds to that mandate and draws on the European Parliament's resolutions of 2023 and 2025; its detailed sectoral analysis sits in the accompanying Staff Working Document.

The genealogy matters, because it explains the document's character. This is a response to a precise request from the Member States, not a free-standing vision. The Commission was asked whether the Union is ready, and it answered that question.

2. Enlargement as a Geopolitical Imperative

The opening section nonetheless makes a clear political claim. “Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and wider threats to European security,” it states, “have made enlargement a geopolitical imperative.” Enlargement is presented as a long-term investment in peace, security and prosperity that increases the Union's political and economic weight. On the day of publication, von der Leyen put it more directly: “Enlargement of our Union is a geopolitical imperative. Today, we are laying the groundwork to ensure that a larger Union is also a stronger one.”¹

Two principles anchor the rest of the text. The first is that accession remains strictly merit-based: each country advances according to its own reforms. The second is the “two-track” logic of Granada: candidates reform, and the Union prepares itself at the same time. The central message of the reviews follows from this. In the Commission's assessment, the Union can accommodate a larger membership through targeted adaptations within the existing Treaties — Treaty change is supported “where needed”, but it is not treated as a precondition.

That single choice shapes everything that follows. It makes the proposals realistic, and it also sets their limits.

Part II — What the Commission Proposes

3. Governance: Deciding Faster Without Changing the Treaties

The most persistent fear about enlargement is paralysis. A Union of thirty or more members, the argument goes, cannot function if a single government can block decisions. The Commission's answer is to make full use of tools that already exist.

The first tool is the **passerelle clause**, which allows the European Council or the Council to replace unanimity with qualified-majority voting in a given area. The Commission will continue to push for this in sanctions, human rights, civilian Common Security and Defence Policy missions, tax fraud and evasion, fiscal measures in energy policy, and social protection. It also points to flexibility already in the Treaties: constructive abstention in foreign policy, and Article 31(2) of the Treaty on European Union, which permits qualified-majority voting in certain foreign-policy decisions. To reassure hesitant capitals, it recalls existing safety valves such as the “emergency brake” and the Ioannina mechanism.

The most significant proposal concerns the accession process itself. Today the Council decides by unanimity not only on admitting a new member but on every intermediate step, such as opening a negotiating cluster. The Commission recommends qualified-majority voting for these intermediate decisions, while keeping unanimity for the final decision on accession. In practice, this would stop a single government from holding a candidate hostage for years over an unrelated dispute.

The Commission also wants wider use of **enhanced cooperation**, which allows at least nine Member States to proceed together when the whole Union cannot. It cites two successes: the European Public Prosecutor's Office, and the Ukraine Support Loan for 2026–2027. Finally, it addresses the size of the institutions. The European Parliament is capped at 750 members plus the President, and seats will need to be redistributed. The Treaties allow a smaller Commission, but the European Council has so far kept one Commissioner per Member State — a decision that must be reviewed when the Union reaches thirty members.

The principle here is pragmatic: change how the Union decides without reopening the Treaties. The weakness is equally clear. Activating a passerelle clause itself requires unanimity, so the reform depends on the very veto it seeks to reduce.

4. Values and the Rule of Law

The second area addresses a concern that has grown since 2010: what happens if a country meets the membership criteria, joins, and then reverses its reforms? The Commission's answer is that monitoring must form “a continuous framework extending beyond accession”.

Before accession, the **fundamentals cluster** — rule of law, democratic institutions, public administration and economic criteria — opens first, closes last and sets the pace of negotiations. Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia already take part in the EU's annual **Rule of Law Report** alongside the Member States; other candidates will be added “as and when they become ready”. Future members must be able to participate in the European Public Prosecutor's Office from the first day of membership.

After accession, the full rule-of-law toolbox applies: the Rule of Law Report, infringement proceedings, budgetary conditionality and **Article 7 TEU**. Here the Commission is unusually frank. It acknowledges that Article 7's high thresholds — a four-fifths majority to establish a risk, unanimity to establish a breach — and

the absence of timeframes “hamper timely action”. It proposes to explore clearer timeframes through interinstitutional arrangements.

The section also links enlargement to democratic resilience. Enlargement countries are associated with the **European Democracy Shield** and the European Centre for Democratic Resilience, covering electoral integrity, foreign information manipulation and interference, media freedom and civic space. The underlying principle is that vulnerabilities in candidate countries become the Union's vulnerabilities, well before accession.

5. Policies and the Budget

The policy reviews conclude that enlargement brings scale — a larger Single Market, access to critical raw materials, more industrial and defence capacity — but also costs and disparities. Two points deserve attention.

The first is Ukraine. The Communication states that the “scale, structure and very high levels of productivity” of Ukrainian agriculture warrant “targeted arrangements that would significantly limit financial support and market access for sensitive agricultural products”. This is the clearest admission in the document that full and equal membership may, in some sectors, be delayed for a long time. Transitional limits on the free movement of workers are also envisaged, “as in previous enlargement rounds”.

The second is money. The Commission presents its proposal for the 2028–2034 **Multiannual Financial Framework** as the main response to the budgetary questions of enlargement. Pre-accession support would move into the new **Global Europe** instrument, tied to reforms through objective-based plans, as the Ukraine Facility and the Growth Plans for the Western Balkans and Moldova already are. The method has been tested once: on 30 June 2026 the Commission presented a financial package for Montenegro, setting out how it would move from pre-accession funding to the internal EU budget at the moment of accession.

The approach is careful and incremental. It is also thin on figures. The Communication refers the hard budgetary questions to MFF negotiations that have not yet concluded.

6. Gradual Integration: Benefits Before Membership

Gradual integration is perhaps the most practical idea in the document. Candidates that meet the relevant conditions would participate earlier in selected EU policies, so that citizens and businesses feel the benefits before accession, and administrations learn to apply EU rules.

Some of this is already happening. Albania, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia have joined the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA) schemes. Ukraine and Moldova joined the “Roam Like at Home” area on 1 January 2026, and in June 2026 the Council authorised negotiations to extend it to the Western Balkans. The Commission now wants to go further: deeper access to the Single Market and strategic sectors such as semiconductors and artificial intelligence; progressive participation in the trans-European energy and transport networks; and closer cooperation in defence industry and military mobility. Candidates would also become observers in EU agencies and expert groups, and, after negotiations close, in Council and Commission work — without any right to vote.

The Commission will hold annual gradual integration dialogues with each partner. Two conditions run through the entire section: full alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy, including sanctions, and reversibility. Access “should be suspended or withdrawn where warranted”. Gradual integration is a reward, and rewards can be taken back.

7. Safeguards in Future Accession Treaties

The final set of proposals has attracted the most attention. Future accession treaties would contain stronger safeguards against backsliding after accession.

The three traditional safeguard clauses — economic, internal market, and justice and home affairs — would remain, but their activation period, previously three years after accession, would be “significantly” extended. A general monitoring clause would cover the period between signature of the treaty and accession, and a **postponement clause** would allow accession itself to be delayed, as a last resort, if a country backslides before its first day of membership. The decision-making arrangements for postponement “remain to be specified”.

The most far-reaching innovation is an **institutional safeguard clause**. For fifteen years after accession, serious breaches of the values in Article 2 TEU or of the principle of sincere cooperation could trigger measures extending, in particularly serious cases, to suspension of voting rights in the Council. Measures would be “deemed adopted” unless the Council rejected them by qualified majority — a reversed logic that makes sanctions far easier to impose than under Article 7.

Two further proposals are politically sensitive. New members would undertake, for a limited period, not to oppose decisions on future enlargements over bilateral disputes. And full application of the Schengen rules would depend on explicit rule-of-law conditions. The Commission will apply this approach first to Montenegro.

The Commission anticipates the obvious objection. Fifteen years of special safeguards, a sanction on voting rights that is easier to trigger than anything that applies to existing members, and a pledge not to use the veto on enlargement can easily be read as a probationary form of membership. Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos rejects that reading: “We don’t want a two-tier membership. This is about protecting ourselves — an insurance policy.”² The legal question is harder to set aside. Article 4(2) TEU obliges the Union to respect the equality of Member States, and no previous accession treaty has linked a new member’s voting rights to a separate and lighter procedure for so long. Whether such a clause would withstand review by the Court of Justice remains an open question.

The principle behind this section is the clearest lesson the Union has drawn from the past fifteen years: it is easier to protect values before accession than to restore them afterwards.

Part III — Assessment and Implications

8. Strengths: What the Document Gets Right

The Communication’s main strength is that it addresses the real reason enlargement stalls. Resistance in Member State capitals rarely comes from doubts about geopolitics; it comes from fear of importing dysfunction — of admitting a country that later blocks decisions or dismantles its courts. The proposals respond directly to that fear. Qualified-majority voting on intermediate steps reduces the risk of hostage-taking. The institutional safeguard and the postponement clause offer insurance against backsliding. The commitment not to block future enlargements over bilateral disputes addresses a problem that has repeatedly frozen the Western Balkans.

The second strength is concreteness. The document names instruments and a first test case, Montenegro, and gradual integration already produces visible results for citizens.

The third strength is honesty. The Commission admits that Article 7 has not worked as intended and that Ukrainian agriculture cannot simply be absorbed into the current system. Paradoxically, these admissions

make enlargement more credible, not less. A process that names its difficulties is easier to defend before sceptical electorates than one that ignores them.

9. Weaknesses: What It Leaves Unresolved

The weaknesses are equally real. The first is the decision not to propose Treaty change. The Commission says it supports Treaty change “where needed”, yet it never identifies where that need lies. The result is a reform programme built entirely on existing provisions, each of which depends on the agreement of every government. Unanimity remains the rule in foreign policy, taxation and the final decision on accession, and the passerelle route itself requires the consent of all Member States. The approach is realistic, but it postpones the hardest institutional question rather than answering it.

The second weakness is legal force. A Communication is a policy document, not legislation: it binds no one, and the Council and the Parliament are free to take up some proposals and set others aside. Several key elements — the institutional safeguard, the postponement clause, the non-blocking commitment — exist only as outlines, and the decision-making arrangements for postponement are, in the Commission's own words, still “to be specified”.

The third weakness is the risk to equality of membership. Long safeguard periods, carve-outs for agriculture and conditional access to Schengen may each be justified individually. Taken together, they create the impression of a membership granted in instalments. The Commission insists this is not a two-tier Union; candidates will judge by how the safeguards are used.

The fourth weakness is the absence of strategic vision. The document says little about where the Union's borders should lie, how enlargement relates to the Black Sea, the South Caucasus or Central Asian connectivity, or what kind of power the enlarged Union should be. This was not its mandate. But a text that calls enlargement a “geopolitical imperative” invites the question of why its geopolitics stops at a single sentence.

10. The Countries the Document Names — and Those It Does Not

Several readers have noticed that some candidates appear by name while others do not. The pattern is not arbitrary. The Communication names a country only where a concrete instrument or milestone already exists. Montenegro appears because its financial package and accession arrangements are the first test case. Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia appear because they take part in the Rule of Law Report. Montenegro, Albania, Moldova and Ukraine appear because they will receive indicative roadmaps in the 2026 enlargement Communication, “provided they maintain the pace of reforms”. Ukraine also appears in connection with agriculture and defence cooperation.

Four candidates or applicants are absent, each for a different reason.

Bosnia and Herzegovina was granted candidate status in December 2022, and EU leaders agreed to open accession negotiations in March 2024. However, its negotiating framework has still not been adopted, so negotiations have not formally started.³ Its omission from this document was noted in the Bosnian media.⁴

Kosovo applied for membership in December 2022, but the Council has never forwarded its application to the Commission for an opinion. Five Member States do not recognise its independence.⁵

Türkiye has been a candidate since 1999, but in June 2018 the Council concluded that its accession negotiations had “effectively come to a standstill” and that no further chapters could be opened or closed.⁶

Georgia was granted candidate status on 14 December 2023. In June 2024 the European Council concluded that the accession process was “de facto halted” because of democratic backsliding. On 28 November 2024

the Georgian authorities announced that they would not pursue accession negotiations until the end of 2028. In November 2025 the Commission described Georgia as “a candidate country in name only”, and in December 2025 the Council Presidency concluded that the process had “effectively come to a standstill”.⁷

None of these countries has been removed from the enlargement process. All remain covered by the document's general references to “candidates” and “enlargement countries”, and the Commission commits to include further candidates “as and when they become ready”. The omission reflects the state of each accession process, not a narrowing of the Union's enlargement perimeter.

Conclusion. A New Model of Membership

Preparing for a wider Union will not be remembered for its rhetoric. Its significance lies elsewhere: it quietly redefines what EU membership means for the next generation of members. Membership will be gradual, with benefits arriving before accession. It will be conditional, with access tied to continued reform and to alignment with EU foreign policy. And for a period it will be reversible, with safeguards that can postpone accession or suspend rights after it.

This is a different model from the “big bang” enlargement of 2004. It reflects what the Union has learned since: that institutions can be captured, reforms reversed and vetoes used for leverage. Whether the model succeeds depends less on this document than on what follows — the 2026 enlargement package, the roadmaps for the frontrunners, the MFF negotiations and, above all, the Montenegro test case. The Commission closes with a sentence that sums up its ambition: “rigorous and merit-based do not mean slow”. The coming years will show whether the Member States agree.

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Dr George Robakidze

George Robakidze is a diplomat and policy expert specialising in international politics, security, and European integration. He has held senior roles in Georgia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, focusing on political affairs, Euro-Atlantic integration, and regional security.

He holds a PhD in Political Science. His research focuses on radical and populist movements in Eastern Europe, alongside broader political and international issues.

¹ **FENA / N1** - “Preparing for a wider Union: Gradual integration and safeguards against backsliding by new members”, 7 October 2026 — quotes President von der Leyen and notes the absence of Bosnia and Herzegovina. [n1info.ba](#)

² **Fred Byrne, EUobserver** - “Commission seeks 15-year safeguards on future member states, but says reforms won't create two-tier EU”, 6 October 2026 — quotes Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos. [euobserver.com](#)

³ **Council of the European Union** - “Bosnia and Herzegovina”, enlargement policy page, updated 2 October 2026. [consilium.europa.eu](#)

⁴ **FENA / N1** - “Preparing for a wider Union: Gradual integration and safeguards against backsliding by new members”, 7 October 2026 — quotes President von der Leyen and notes the absence of Bosnia and Herzegovina. [n1info.ba](#)

⁵ **Kosovo Online** - “Kosovo's EU membership application stuck in a drawer for three years”, 15 December 2025. [kosovo-online.com](#)

⁶ **Council of the European Union** - “Türkiye”, policy page, citing the General Affairs Council conclusions of June 2018. [consilium.europa.eu](#)

⁷ **European External Action Service** - “The European Union and Georgia” — European Council conclusions of June 2024, Commission assessment of November 2025 and Presidency conclusions of December 2025. [eeas.europa.eu](#)