THE EUROPEAN UNION'S HALF-OPEN DOORS

TO ENLARGEMENT TOWARDS EASTERN EUROPE AND THE BALKANS

On 4 November 2025, the European Commission adopted its annual enlargement package, (**LINK**) presenting its assessment of the progress made by the candidate countries, reaffirming that "*the momentum for enlargement was at the top of the EU's priority agenda*" and confirming that the accession of ten new Member States was "*increasingly within reach*".

With enlargement as a political objective, the Commission had also committed to presenting a "**communication on policy reviews and reforms**" in candidate countries and Member States, supporting Member States' efforts to strengthen public confidence in the process and contribute to enlargement. However, this commitment has not yet been fulfilled.

Eleven months on from that package, the European Commission has presented a new communication on enlargement on 6 October, in which enthusiasm for enlargement within a definite timeframe has evaporated both within the European Commission and amongst Member State governments, because the reform process in the candidate countries has slowed down, whilst internal EU reforms are far from being launched, and the deadlock in negotiations over a Multiannual Financial Framework – which is due to run until 2034 once enlargement is complete – is reinforcing Member States' reluctance to open the EU's doors to new members, all of whom require substantial financial assistance.

The growing reluctance towards enlargement is confirmed by the belief that the conditions could not exist for the three neighbouring countries of Eastern Europe (Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine) to join the EU within a definite timeframe; that the political situation in the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and, above all, Serbia) has become progressively more complicated; and that the total absence of internal reforms in Turkey (which is still formally a candidate for accession) makes it difficult to envisage that country ever becoming a full member of an enlarged EU.

Moreover, the European Commission has done nothing in the past eleven months to bolster the confidence of national public opinion in the EU Member States regarding the enlargement process and the idea that, in a future which is currently unpredictable, the EU might comprise up to thirty-five or even more Member States – bearing in mind that, in many cases, the accession treaties will have to be put to national referenda.

The European Political Community (EPC), conceived by Emmanuel Macron as a substitute for enlargement, has never really taken off, having quickly turned into a lacklustre forum for pointless summits of Heads of State or Government, lacking

transparency and public debate involving the media, the press, civil society and think tanks.

Governments and the European Commission remain stubbornly convinced that – despite the European Parliament's unheeded calls (**LINK**) – the Pandora's box of EU institutional reforms should not be opened in an attempt to make the EU function more effectively and to make its supranational legitimacy more democratic, in order to meet the challenges of the transition from a community of twenty-seven quarrelling or complacent governments to a continental integration organisation which would, in any case, exclude around ten countries from the wider Council of Europe.

In light of the European Commission's changed assessment of enlargement – which essentially takes stock of what has happened over the past eleven months – it would be necessary to launch an urgent European public debate on three scenarios for political action, which are complementary but not mutually exclusive:

- The first scenario is that proposed by Romano Prodi at the start of this century and prior to the major enlargement (*everything but institutions*) to allow a '*Ring of Friends'* to participate in the internal market, research, energy and security policies as part of a '*neighbourhood policy*,' whilst excluding them from the EU's political institutions so as not to expand indefinitely and overload the EU's political structure.
- The second proposal is the one envisaged by Ursula von der Leyen in her State of the Union address on 16 September for Canada, which is not currently provided for in the Treaty of Lisbon: bilateral '*association*' agreements that would allow candidate countries to participate in EU policies, offering them a sort of testing ground and accustoming them to making use of the *acquis communautaire* with a broader level of involvement than is currently the case in certain specific policies linked to internal reforms. A network of association agreements was, moreover, suggested by Giorgio Napolitano – then Member of the European Parliament and Chair of the Committee on Constitutional Affairs – together with Jacques Delors at a seminar to reflect on the consequences of enlargement to Central Europe, in order to address fears of a *'big bang'* (which subsequently took place in 2005 with ten new accessions) imposed by governments that had rejected the European Commission's idea of the '*regatta method*', in which candidate countries would all set off together in the race towards enlargement but would cross the finish line separately, in line with their different rates of adaptation.
- The third scenario was envisaged by Alain Lamassoure during the constitutional deliberations of the Convention chaired by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 2002–2003, and subsequently revived by Jean-Louis Bourlanges, as Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the French National Assembly, on 11 September 2023: a short treaty of a constitutional nature to ensure the deepening of the Union prior to enlargement and to formalise the transition from a hybrid organisation such as the EU to a community of a federal nature—and thus

> founded on a supranational democracy—by requiring Member States and candidate countries to ratify it (either through national parliamentary procedures or via a pan-European referendum, ed.) and establishing the principle that it shall enter into force upon ratification by a majority of the signatory countries. To respect the constitutional – rather than treaty-based – nature of this treaty, its drafting should not be entrusted to an intergovernmental conference but to the European Parliamentary Assembly, which speaks on behalf of European citizens in constant dialogue with the legislative assemblies of the EU Member States and the candidate countries.

Alongside a "*draft political manifesto*" to be submitted to parties and candidates in the forthcoming national parliamentary elections (**LINK**), we propose launching a European debate on these three proposals, linking the first two to the assessment of the European Commission's communication of 6 October and the third to the European elections in 2029.

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