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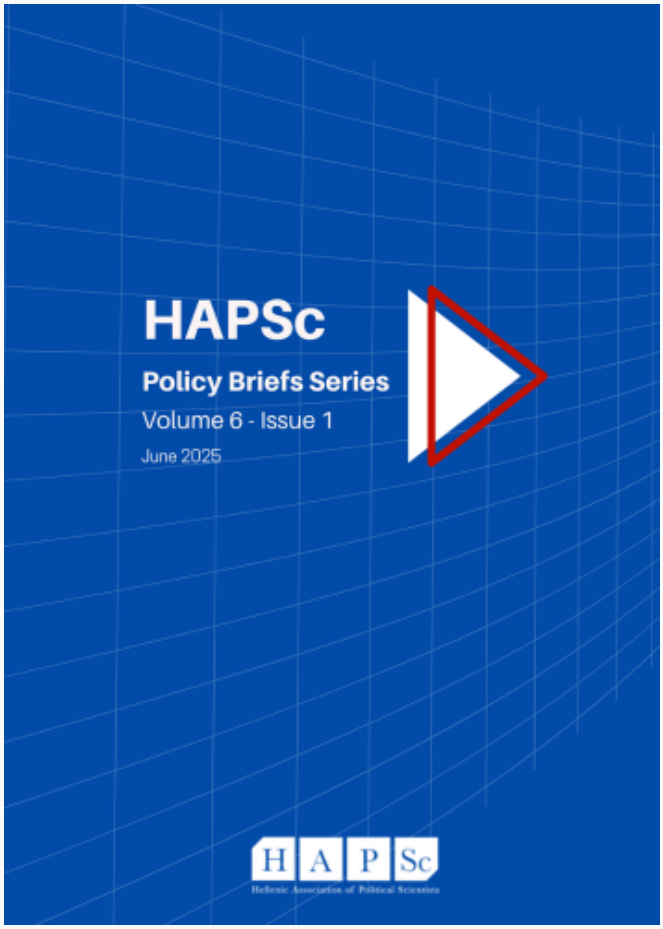
HAPSc Policy Briefs Series

Vol 6, No 1 (2025)

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series



A Union in Transition: Reforming Institutions and Embracing Enlargement for Strategic Resilience

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doi: 10.12681/hapscpbs.43199

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To cite this article:

Giannopoulou, S. (2025). A Union in Transition: Reforming Institutions and Embracing Enlargement for Strategic Resilience. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, *6*(1), 142–150. https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.43199

https://epublishing.ekt.gr | **e-Publisher:** EKT | **Downloaded at:** 14/02/2026 09:14:12

A Union in Transition: Reforming Institutions and Embracing Enlargement for Strategic Resilience[1]

Spyridoula Giannopoulou [2]

Abstract

This policy brief examines the European Union's urgent need to reform its institutional architecture while strategically managing its next wave of enlargement. In light of global instability, ranging from the war in Ukraine to broader geopolitical rivalries, the EU must address internal challenges such as its democratic deficit, opaque decision-making, and weak public engagement. Simultaneously, external pressures from authoritarian powers like China and Russia amplify the need for a more cohesive and resilient Union. The 2023 Enlargement Package and the Schengen accession of Bulgaria and Romania mark renewed momentum for EU expansion. However, without significant internal reforms, this momentum risks stalling. The brief proposes key reforms: fusing the EU's dual executive roles into one directly elected president, enhancing the European Parliament's legislative powers, activating the Lisbon Treaty's passerelle clauses, and introducing new pre-accession tools such as regional integration hubs and civic fellowships. These measures aim to enhance democratic legitimacy, operational effectiveness, and the Union's global standing. By aligning its governance with citizen expectations and strategic realities, the EU can not only attract new members but also deepen cohesion among existing ones, ensuring a sustainable, values-driven expansion in a more competitive international environment.

Keywords: EU Institutional Reform, Democratic Deficit, Enlargement Policy, Pre-accession Integration Mechanisms, Qualified Majority Voting (QMV), European Parliament Empowerment.

Introduction

The European Union, as a sui generis union of sovereign states, has faced multiple crises the last decade that challenged even the most pro-European minds. It could be argued that the Union's existence, identity and sustainability were threatened again and again by the Covid-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, the large-scale irregular migration flows, the energy crisis along with the economic turmoil in the Eurozone that ended not so many years ago. Yet, the most pressing challenge facing the EU today is the rapidly changing geopolitical environment, coupled with an urgent need for comprehensive institutional reform.

Amid global turbulence, the EU is increasingly required to confront both persistent structural deficiencies, such as its democratic deficit and inefficient decision-making mechanisms, as well as geopolitical upheavals in its neighborhood, like the Russo-Ukrainian War and the conflict between

[1] To cite this paper in APA style: Giannopoulou, S. (2025 Union in Transition: Reforming Institutions and Embracing Enlargement for Strategic Resilience. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series, 6*(1), 142-150. https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.43199

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Hamas and Israel. In this context, the Union's enlargement policy appears to undergo a significant paradigm shift. Since Croatia's accession on 1 July 2013, the EU has not admitted any new Member State until now. Nevertheless, the Commission's 2023 Enlargement Package has reinvigorated discussions on expansion, proposing accession negotiations with countries such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and offering candidate status to Georgia. Finally, the recent integration of Bulgaria and Romania into Schengen is a significant indicator of change. This brief explores these complex variables and offers strategic recommendations for a more adaptive and resilient European future in view of an upcoming enlargement.

Problem Description & Background

Historical Context and the Evolution of European Integration

From its origins as a post-war peace experiment, the European Union has undergone multiple transformations, including efforts for political, economic, and social integration among its Member States. Successive treaties, notably the Treaty of Lisbon, have attempted to streamline decision-making processes and enhance democratic legitimacy across the Union. The European Union historically always chose enlargement over deepening. However, the enlargement of the EU was a long-forgotten debate due to the shocks that the EU has experienced in recent decades with the crisis in the Eurozone, the exit of Great Britain, the immigration crisis and the pandemic, which froze the accession procedures of the six countries of the Western Balkans (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo). As a result, the idea of deepening before enlargement appeared with great force (Koppa, 2022).

The internal architecture of the EU was not originally designed to accommodate the rapid expansion experienced during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Nonetheless, enlargement has historically been a key driver of both peace and stability, embedding democratic norms and fostering economic convergence (European Commission, n.d.). Although to many the European Union has ended as a Kantian Power with no geopolitical influence whatsoever, the enlargement is of strategic importance and one of the most powerful geopolitical tools available for the EU; a strategic investment for peace and security (European Parliament, 2022). It should be underlined that this process has also exposed structural vulnerabilities within institutions that currently face the complexity of representing an increasingly diverse range of national interests.

Geopolitical Upheavals and Their Impact on the EU

Simultaneously, the EU confronts an increasingly turbulent neighborhood. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 jolted the Union into rapid collective action: coordinated arms

supplies, unprecedented sanctions on Russia, and emergency energy measures collectively demonstrated that, when pressed, the EU can act in unison (Consilium, 2025). Yet the crisis also exposed latent fissures: member-state veto threats over energy relief and sanction packages revealed how national interests can override collective solidarity under stress. The process of Ukrainian accession has revealed also an essential absence of internal unity in a period where we see European policies being re-nationalized, diffused suspicion between member states and uncompromising priority to national interests to the point where the threats for veto use paralyze the procedures.

In the Middle East, the October 2023 Israel-Hamas war and the wider regional rivalry between Iran and Israel have produced humanitarian emergencies, refugee flows, and security dilemmas that test the EU's diplomatic agility and crisis-management capacity. Meanwhile, China's Belt and Road investments in the Western Balkans and strategic engagement by Turkey and Saudi Arabia threaten to dilute the EU's normative influence in its near abroad (Koppa & Tzifakis, 2024; Bianco, 2024). At the same time, debates over reliance on NATO and the United States for defence have rekindled calls for European strategic autonomy in security policy (Retter et al., 2021).

These external pressures converge with internal institutional strains to create a legitimacy gap. Citizens perceive EU decision making as remote, technocratic, and unaccountable, especially when unanimity-bound Council processes produce stalemate or lowest-common-denominator compromises (Stefanou, 2020). At stake is not only effective crisis response but the EU's identity as a normative power committed to democracy, rule of law, and collective security.

Enlargement: Past Achievements and Future Prospects

Croatia's 2013 accession represented the capstone of the seventh enlargement wave, which had extended the Union's borders deep into Central and Eastern Europe. That process cemented democratic transitions and market reforms, but also left institutions stretched thin. After 2013, enlargement receded from the forefront as the Union grappled with existential challenges at home. The Commission's 2023 Enlargement Package, published on 8 November, marks a decisive turning point. It recommends opening accession talks with Ukraine, Moldova, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and granting candidate status to Georgia, moves that carry profound geopolitical significance as well as reaffirmation of EU values (European Commission, 2023). By offering a credible path to membership, the Union seeks to stabilise its periphery, counter authoritarian influence, and lock in reforms in states at risk of backsliding. The strategic importance of enlargement for the EU also acquires a long-term perspective, given its negative demographic trends. In this light, adding new

member states would help the EU to address its needs for human and other resources in the coming years and decades (Mentzelopoulou, 2025).

Meanwhile, the Schengen inclusion of Bulgaria and Romania in early 2025 demonstrates that integration dynamics continue within the existing membership. Free movement, a cornerstone of EU citizenship, is expanding even as the membership question re-emerges. Yet these developments underscore the pressing need for institutional adaptation. The current configuration of the Union's bodies, ranging from parliamentary representation and decision-making processes to the allocation of budgetary resources, require comprehensive reform to manage the challenges of an expanded membership base (Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2024). Political fragmentation, rising far-right sentiments, and concerns over electoral interference by foreign forces compound these issues and pose ongoing risks to the Rule of Law within Europe (Hancock et al., 2024; Dunai & Dubois, 2024).

Specifically, far-right parties that are in government in several states (Hungary, Italy, Slovakia, Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, Austria) express great scepticism about enlarging the EU, that can slow down or derail enlargement policy, particularly concerning Ukraine and the Western Balkans (Alexandris, 2025). Even though the positions of these parties vary on the issue, the accelerating nationalisation of the policy is very much apparent and introduces more complexities into Council decision-making than the EU can handle (Blockmans, 2025). This fragmentation risks transforming enlargement into a transactional issue rather than a values-driven strategic project, thereby weakening the coherence of the Union's external action. As domestic electoral considerations increasingly dictate national positions on enlargement, consensus within the Council becomes more fragile and conditional (Buras & Morina, 2023). This politicisation may not only delay the accession of candidate countries but also undermine the EU's credibility as a normative power, particularly in its immediate neighbourhood where geopolitical competition is intensifying (Hollander, 2024).

The EU's Internal Reform Imperative

At the heart of the European Union's current difficulties lies a persistent democratic deficit. This essentially means, according to Stefanou (2020), that the EU system is not based on popular sovereignty, legislation does not follow fully democratic procedures, decisions are often taken and policies are often drawn up far from citizens and without any participation, the EU institutions and their decisions are not accountable to European citizens, at least not in the same way as the systems of the Member States. Key EU institutions, such as the European Commission, are not elected by

European citizens, are not representative and are not accountable to the European people, to EU citizens, at least not in the same way as is the case within the member states.

European citizens perceive this system as something purely technocratic, strange and foreign to them, they fail to comprehend its functions and importance, hardly relating with the whole endeavour of integration, even though it affects directly and in many ways their everyday lives (Stefanou, 2022). This happens partly due to the fact that the European Commission – perhaps the most influential body of the EU in terms of decision-making and law formation– is committed to a so-called "democracy without politics". The term, used by Oleart & Theuns (2022), describes the Commission's choice to adopt technocratic and legalistic approaches to democracy, overlooking in that way the importance of political pluralism and citizen engagement.

Balfour (2024) agrees that the EU's reliance on technocracy, while ensuring much needed policy continuity especially for long-term goals, has contributed to a perception of remoteness and lack of accountability among the populace. Another crucial aspect of the democratic deficit is the absence of a common European identity. As a matter of fact, little coherence exists between national and EU identities, and EU citizens identify with their state of origin rather than the EU. This is particularly evident in examining the declining voter turnout in European elections and growing support for eurosceptic parties (Katsanidou, 2025).

Despite significant efforts to engage citizens with EU affairs and improve transparency through treaty reforms, particularly the Treaty of Lisbon, serious challenges persist. While reforms were intended to address the democratic deficit by fostering civic participation and familiarizing the public with EU structures, their effectiveness has been limited. Micolta Portocarrero (2014) argues that informal legislative negotiations have undermined Lisbon's democratic aims, deepening democratic deterioration. The European Parliament remains institutionally weaker than the Council, and the legislative process lacks transparency, hindering citizen engagement and accountability. Additionally, mechanisms like the "passerelle" clause remain unused, further limiting the treaty's potential.

The fact that only the European Commission can initiate legislative proposals, coupled with the disproportionate influence of certain member states in the Council, has further contributed to perceptions of an undemocratic system. On top of that, the dependence on qualified majorities and the frequent use of vetoes within the Council has often led to prolonged deadlocks in policy implementation, diminishing the overall efficacy of the Union's response in times of crisis (Duff, 2022). A characteristic example is the one involving Hungary's PM Viktor Orbán when it comes to

decisions regarding sanctions against Russia, financial and military support for Ukraine (Foy, Tamma & Dunai, 2024).

Another core institutional challenge the European Union faces is lack of direct accountability in the EU executive leadership and in particular, in the process of selecting the President of the European Commission. Under the current system, the President is nominated by the European Council and confirmed by the European Parliament, leaving EU citizens with no direct say in choosing the individual who leads the Union's executive arm. This indirect method of appointment weakens the perceived legitimacy of the Commission, fuels public disaffection with EU institutions, and reinforces the image of the Union as a technocratic structure distant from its citizens. The absence of a direct electoral link between the electorate and executive leadership also impedes the development of a cohesive European political identity (Poptcheva, 2014).

As the EU contemplates a new wave of enlargement, it becomes imperative to address these structural issues to ensure that all national interests are adequately represented and that the Union's governance mechanisms can keep pace with its growing complexity. Only by aligning its governance structures with the principles of popular sovereignty and transparency can the European Union secure both its democratic legitimacy and its future capacity to unite more than twenty-seven diverse nations around a shared European project. More importantly, it will render the European Union more attractive to the peoples and the governments of the candidate countries and especially in the Western Balkans, where Russian and Chinese influence is quite remarkable.

Policy Options & Recommendations

Proposing one EU President

The experiment of splitting Europe's executive between two "presidents" has not delivered the clarity, unity or accountability that the Union needs. By creating a permanent but separate President of the European Council and a Commission President who also sits in that body, the Treaty of Lisbon introduced a bicephalous system that too often duplicates effort, sows confusion about who speaks for Europe, and allows one institution to blame the other when things turn out unexpectedly. In practice the General Affairs Council remains chaired by rotating national presidencies, foreign-policy unanimity still paralyzes action, and the ordinary legislative work of the Council is disrupted from shifting six-monthly agendas.

The proposal I put forth advocates merging the roles of President of the European Council and President of the European Commission into a single, directly accountable EU President who would also chair the General Affairs Council. This reform aims to unify strategic leadership, improve

coherence in foreign policy, and align executive power with democratic oversight by the European Parliament. It would replace the current system—marked by duplication, division, and rotating presidencies—with consistent leadership and make qualified-majority voting the norm. Additionally, having the President elected directly by EU citizens would enhance democratic legitimacy and strengthen the connection between the electorate and EU institutions.

Enhancing the powers of the European Parliament

The European Parliament currently shares legislative power with the Council under Article 294 TFEU's ordinary legislative procedure. However, in key areas like Common Foreign and Security Policy (Article 36 TEU) and most taxation matters, including indirect tax harmonisation (Articles 113 and 115 TFEU), its role is limited to consultation, while Council unanimity is required. This imbalance in initiative and veto powers contributes to perceptions of an undemocratic, technocratic EU, further undermines the Commission's legitimacy, and obstructs the development of a unified European political identity.

I am inclined to believe that granting the European Parliament the right of legislative initiative would enhance its ability to address urgent issues and better represent citizens' concerns. Additionally, applying the Lisbon Treaty's passerelle clauses to bring the Common Foreign and Security Policy and all forms of indirect taxation (Articles 36 TEU, 113 and 115 TFEU) under an expanded ordinary legislative procedure would strengthen democratic accountability by making MEPs directly answerable to voters in all policy areas. Ultimately, these reforms would reinforce a shared European political identity by visibly empowering the Parliament in shaping even the most sensitive policies.

Strengthening Pre-Accession and Border Integration Measures

Cross Border Innovation Accelerator

Recent developments, such as the integration of Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen area in early 2025, highlight that EU enlargement remains an ongoing process with implications not only for candidate countries but also for current Member States. To ensure successful and sustainable expansion, the EU should increase investment in pre-accession programmes focused on capacity building, judicial reform, and economic development. To complement traditional pre accession support, the EU should pilot a Cross Border Innovation Accelerator that brings together start ups, research institutions, and SMEs from candidate and neighbouring Member States to co develop digital, green, and advanced manufacturing solutions. This accelerator could provide seed funding, regulatory sandboxes, and mentorship, forging economic interdependence before formal accession and promoting a shared sense of European innovation culture.

European Civic Fellowship

Embedding new members also requires strengthening societal bonds. The EU could launch a European Civic Fellowship for young leaders from candidate countries to spend a year working in EU institutions, national parliaments, and civil society organisations in different Member States. Fellows would build transnational networks, acquire practical governance skills, and return home as ambassadors of EU values, thereby seeding a pan European identity at the grassroots.

Regional Integration Hubs

To address the diversity of integration challenges, the EU can set up Regional Integration Hubs in key border areas, such as the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership, and Mediterranean neighbourhood. Each hub would coordinate infrastructure projects (transport, energy interconnectors), environmental resilience programmes, and cross border labour mobility schemes. By clustering resources and decision making locally, these hubs would accelerate convergence and anchor candidate regions within the EU's economic and regulatory space.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the EU has evolved during the decades to welcome a growing number of new Member States; nonetheless, the EU institutional setting and decision-making mechanisms will probably need to further adapt to include, in a near future, the current Candidate Countries, as its infrastructure was not originally crafted to accommodate such a large number of Member States. Major challenges concerning the EU parliamentary representativity, the role of the Commission and the Council, voting and decision-making processes, the budgetary allocation and its potential reform will have to face the increasingly diversified and opposite national interests. In addition, at an international level, the rise of far-right parties.

From my perspective, if the Union does not make the strategically effective and correct moves, she will remain at best static if not dissolved due to the constant economic and geopolitical pressure derived from the rising regional powers. That will lead her to fall behind, to be absorbed in internal matters that merely reach the borders of a simple Economic and Customs Union without any further political and cultural unification between the member states and finally, no geopolitical projection of power. The European Union, in my opinion, has exceeded the expectations of its pioneers and visionaries, has been most entrepreneurial when it comes to managing the climate crisis, the Economic and Monetary Union, and many more areas of the European citizens. The EU is always evolving, adapting to new realities, and, as before, this extraordinary entity has the potential to thrive through multiple difficulties.

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