

Why Economic Security Must Be at the Heart of EU Enlargement



by Wojciech Przybylski

- Economic security raises the stakes of enlargement: deeper market integration must be matched by strategic alignment on the policies needed to protect an increasingly integrated European market.
- A credible path to full membership provides the leverage for this deeper transformation, while gradual integration should be used to frontload economic-security requirements rather than substitute for accession.
- The Commission's proposals for stronger safeguards in future accession treaties offer an opportunity to embed economic security into the terms of entry, with Montenegro providing the first test of this approach.

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The European Union is deciding not only whether to enlarge but on what terms. In its **new Communication** on preparing for a wider Union, published on 6 October, the European Commission has outlined proposals to strengthen gradual integration and introduce new safeguards for future members. The proposal is part of a broader debate over whether partial integration can bring candidate countries closer to the EU while full accession

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remains slow and politically contingent. Some proposals go further in rethinking the boundary between integration and membership. In May, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz **proposed** “associate membership” for Ukraine, combining participation in EU institutions without voting rights, phased access to EU programmes and an extension of the mutual assistance clause.

The risk is that the proliferation of intermediate stages and benefits creates ambiguity about the final destination

There are good reasons behind these proposals. Accession is slow, ratification is politically exposed and prolonged delays erode the credibility of the process – so pushing through actual integration where it is feasible is a way forward. At the same time, the recent pursuit of EU’s own economic security strategy exposes a fundamental weakness in separating deeper economic integration from full membership. Gradual integration into the single market, and even more so associate membership, could give candidates many of the benefits of economic integration without necessarily generating the deeper alignment needed to protect it. Sanctions implementation, investment screening and export controls increasingly form part of the Union’s economic security. Extending market access – without addressing the candidate countries’ strategic dependences on EU’s adversaries like Russia or China – could widen the space the Union needs to protect without making it safer. Moreover, the very process of evaluating a country’s accession through the prism of economic security policy risks, as well as potential benefits, would make the candidate a co-creator of the common EU agenda from the onset.

Full accession is therefore a practical option: a credible membership perspective provides the leverage for deeper transformation, including through front-loaded economic-security

requirements for membership. Economic statecraft should be built into the terms of entry, so that each new member makes Europe more secure as a whole.

The temptation of the shortcut

Let us look back at the idea of “associate membership”, which sits within a wider family of ideas. The Commission has promoted gradual integration since its **2020 enlargement methodology**, envisaging the phasing of candidates into individual EU policies, the single market and EU programmes ahead of accession. Its October 2026 Communication on preparing for a wider Union has taken this approach further, proposing reinforced gradual integration based on conditional and reversible access to EU policies and programmes. Around it, sit member-state proposals and think-tank models of staged accession. These approaches, including associate membership, respond to a genuine problem of how to keep enlargement moving when progress through the formal accession process is politically blocked. The risk, however, is that the proliferation of intermediate stages and benefits creates ambiguity about the final destination. The Commission **insists** that gradual integration should “complement and reinforce” accession rather than replace it. Yet this distinction may become harder to sustain as candidates gain access to an expanding range of EU policies and benefits before membership.

This ambiguity has already generated political resistance. Volodymyr Zelensky **called** associate membership unfair, warning that Ukraine would remain voiceless within it. The foreign minister of Ireland – the country holding the rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union – **asked** whether associate members would end up in limbo. But the problem with intermediate forms of integration is not only institutional. Deeper participation in the single market does not in itself transform the strategic choices of candidate countries. A candidate could enter parts of the single market while retaining strategic investments, energy



dependencies or foreign-policy relationships that leave it vulnerable to external influence or undermine weaken EU sanctions and export controls.

This argument has been made clearly by Poland. Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski **has stated** publicly that Ukraine should complete the standard accession process rather than go down the associate membership path. Polish officials set out the same position at a **seminar in Warsaw**. The reasoning is practical. The value of a merit-based accession process lies not only in the membership it ultimately delivers, but in the transformation it requires along the way. A credible prospect of full membership gives the EU leverage to demand politically costly reforms and strategic realignment that access to individual policies or parts of the single market may not generate on its own.

Beneath this lies a structural objection. Economic security is not a technical annex to market access. This is precisely where the leverage of a credible membership perspective should be used and the economic-security requirements need to be applied at the beginning of the accession process, rather than left until the end of negotiations or treated as secondary to intermediate market integration. Otherwise, Europe may import vulnerabilities that are much harder to reverse after accession.

This does not only apply to large candidate countries. Today's enlargement debate often treats Ukraine as the only candidate whose accession carries strategic weight. But economic-security risks are not proportional to a country's size. Moldova's exposure to energy coercion and other forms of external pressure makes its strategic alignment no less relevant. The same principle should apply across the enlargement process for similar reasons. What matters is not only the economic weight candidates bring into the Union, but the dependencies and vulnerabilities they bring with them – and their capacity to address them before accession.

The Hungarian dilemma

Hungary under Viktor Orbán shows what such misalignment costs. A full member that hedged on Russia, kept its dependence on Russian energy and **obstructed** collective decisions on Ukraine could hold the Union hostage under the EU's unanimity rule. The Hungarian case

The value of a merit-based accession process lies in the transformation it requires along the way

has therefore often been invoked to support a seemingly straightforward solution: integrate candidates' economies first, while withholding full voting rights until later. Yet economic security exposes the limits of this approach. The problem is not only whether a government can block common decisions once inside the Union, but whether deeper economic integration takes place before strategic dependencies and vulnerabilities have been addressed. Membership without voting rights may protect EU decision-making, but it does not by itself produce the deeper transformation needed to protect an integrated European market. The lesson from Hungary should therefore be to use the leverage of membership to address economic-security vulnerabilities early in the accession process, rather than relying on the withholding of voting rights as the principal safeguard.

The Western Balkans supply another lesson. North Macedonia changed its name through the Prespa Agreement, only to find its EU path delayed by further bilateral disputes. Politically costly reforms become achievable when the end point is credible. The same applies to the adjustments required by economic security. A candidate parked indefinitely in the waiting room is exposed to political volatility and the multivector foreign policy that has marked parts of the region for a generation. Deeper market



integration can reduce the costs of waiting, but it may not by itself provide sufficient incentives to abandon such relationships and dependencies. The Union needs both a credible accession perspective and a more direct effort to reduce strategic dependencies on its rivals.

An unscreened acquisition in a candidate today could become a vulnerability inside the single market tomorrow

Economic security as an upgraded entry test

Since the European Economic Security Strategy of June 2023, the EU has strengthened its approach to investment screening, the Anti-Coercion Instrument, the Foreign Subsidies Regulation, dual-use export controls and the Critical Raw Materials Act. These instruments are not all governed by the same rules, but together they point to a wider economic statecraft agenda. Enlargement must become now part of it.

As I [argued](#) together with Zoran Nechev, candidates – starting with the Western Balkans – should develop robust foreign direct investment screening, as well as a capacity to align with EU sanctions and sensitive export controls. The Commission’s new Communication moves in this direction, making deeper integration in sensitive sectors conditional on alignment with investment screening, export controls, sanctions implementation and the protection of sensitive technologies. The challenge is to turn these requirements into a central part of accession conditionality rather than treating them simply as conditions for access to individual sectors. By doing so, candidates can turn the *acquis* into a shield against coercion, opaque subsidies and hostile acquisitions rather than bearing it merely as a compliance cost. Joining the Union should mean shedding economic dependencies that leave a state open to pressure. In parallel, the EU must help candidates build the administrative

capacity to identify risky investments: an unscreened acquisition in a candidate today could become a vulnerability inside the single market tomorrow.

The EU does not start from scratch on this. The 2024 [Critical Raw Materials Act](#) points towards a more reciprocal model of pre-accession integration. The Union needs strategic resources that candidates hold. Serbian lithium, Bosnian bauxite and the nickel and chromium of Kosovo and North Macedonia are potential strategic inputs, while Ukraine has significant reserves of critical raw materials. The Act aims to ensure that, by 2030, no more than 65 per cent of EU annual consumption of each strategic raw material at a relevant processing stage comes from one third country. Its approach turns pre-accession cooperation into an immediate industrial opportunity rather than a deferred reward. The Commission has already identified strategic raw-material projects in candidate countries, including Serbia and Ukraine, although projects must meet environmental and social safeguards.

This is more than gradual integration into the single market. It connects industries in candidate countries to supply chains that are vital to the Union’s own economic security. Handled this way, candidates become contributors to Europe’s emerging economic-security architecture, bringing Ukraine’s defence-industrial base and battlefield experience, Moldova’s direct exposure to energy coercion and the Western Balkans’ industrial and transport links. Thus the bargain becomes reciprocal: candidates align more closely with European security priorities, while the Union invests in the assets and capabilities that strengthen common resilience.

Montenegro as proof of concept

Montenegro will provide the first concrete test of this approach. In its 6 October Communication, the Commission proposed a new generation of safeguards for future accession treaties and indicated that the approach should be applied



first to Montenegro's accession arrangements. The Commission's proposals are designed to ensure that commitments undertaken during negotiations remain enforceable around and after accession. The same logic should now be extended to economic-security commitments. The Union should treat Montenegro's accession as a demonstration that enlargement, properly managed, makes Europe economically more secure, and it should say so plainly. That means ensuring that investment screening, sanctions alignment and resilience against coercion are addressed before membership, not left as problems for the next day.

The broader lesson is straightforward. Gradual integration can support accession, but it cannot substitute for a credible path to full membership. The EU should use the accession process to put economic-security requirements early on, ensuring that deeper market integration goes hand in hand with reducing strategic dependencies and strengthening alignment. Montenegro can provide the first test of this approach. Each accession should leave the Union not only larger, but less vulnerable and more independent.

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