

Spasimir Domaradzki, Piotr Oleksy

## Reverse enlargement – plans for fundamental changes in the EU

**Together with some Member States, the EU is working on a plan to change the rules for admitting new members. Its aim is to enable the accession of Albania, Montenegro, Moldova, and Ukraine as early as 2027. The political game is primarily about a fast track to membership for the Ukraine. However, a revolution in the enlargement process would change the entire structure of the Union.**

**The state of accession negotiations.** Albania, Montenegro, Moldova, and Ukraine are the four countries that are most advanced in the EU accession process. The first two are currently considered by the European Commission to be the most advanced on the path to membership. The European Commission does not rule out the formal conclusion of membership negotiations by Montenegro in 2026 and by Albania a year later. Moldova and Ukraine, which were granted candidate status in June 2022, are still waiting for the formal opening of accession negotiations. This decision must be taken unanimously by the European Council, but Hungary is openly opposed to it (pointing out that the veto concerns Ukraine and not Moldova). In fact, while waiting for formal decisions, the European Commission, Kyiv, and Chisinau are already implementing the reforms envisaged in the accession process. At the end of 2025, the EC assessed that both countries were ready to open three of the six thematic clusters. This positive opinion referred to the most important cluster, “fundamental issues,” which concerns justice, human rights, security, and the market economy, as well as two others: “external relations” and “internal market.” The other three clusters concern competitiveness and growth, the green agenda and connectivity, and resources, agriculture, and cohesion.

**A revolution in the enlargement process?** Until recently, EU leaders pointed to 2030 as a possible date for enlargement, but in recent months there has been increasing talk behind the scenes about speeding up the accession process. This necessity is said to result from the dynamics of international processes – primarily Russia’s ongoing war against Ukraine, Russia’s aggressive actions towards the EU, and growing tensions between EU members and the US. The issue of Ukraine’s membership is becoming increasingly important, as it is seen as a guarantee of security for the country and an element of peace negotiations with Russia, as well as a factor significant for increasing the geopolitical weight of the EU itself. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky called for the acceleration and concretization of the accession plan when he told reporters on February 6, 2026: “That is why we say: let’s set a date. Why a specific date? Because it will be signed by Ukraine, Europe, the United States, and Russia.”

On February 10, 2026, Politico published an article by Zoya Sheftalovich, based on interviews with ten anonymous officials and diplomats, outlining a plan to accelerate and revolutionize the EU enlargement process. It was indicated that the plan would consist of five steps. The first step would be to prepare Ukraine and Moldova as much as possible for membership in formal and legal terms. This would involve the EU “informally guiding” the process. However, the officials and diplomats interviewed by the author emphasize that no simplifications in the implementation of EU law would be allowed.

The second step is key to this plan, as it involves creating the possibility of *partial EU membership* or *light membership*. This is also referred to as reverse enlargement. It assumes that candidate countries would join the EU but would not initially enjoy all the rights of membership. As they make progress with internal reforms, their powers would be gradually expanded until they achieve full EU membership.

Steps four and five concern Budapest’s opposition to Ukraine’s accession. According to Politico, EU diplomats are hoping that the Fidesz party will lose the parliamentary elections to be held in Hungary on April 12, 2026, and that the new ruling camp will change its position on this fundamental issue. If this does not happen, in step five, EU

leaders will try to influence the US president to persuade Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to change his position. European diplomats want to convince the US president that this will speed up peace negotiations between Ukraine and Moscow, as Kyiv will gain additional guarantees of support thanks to its membership. It is also assumed that after the elections, Prime Minister Orbán will be less principled on the issue of Ukraine, which is currently one of the main themes of his election campaign in Hungary.

### Comment

The outline of the plan presented above is based on a press release, not on official statements or documents. Nevertheless, there has been talk in Brussels for several months about the preparation of a similar solution. The fact that these assumptions have been published in a reliable portal close to the EU institutions may mean an attempt to present them to the public, initiate a debate, and prepare the ground for their implementation.

The application of the principles of *reverse enlargement* would be a revolution in the accession process and in the very structure of the European Union. It could, *in fact*, lead to the implementation of the idea of a *multi-speed Union*, which assumes different rates and degrees of integration between member states. Proponents of this solution argue that the current enlargement process, established in the 1990s, is not suited to the contemporary dynamics of international relations. This is not unfounded, considering that the EU has not accepted a new member since 2013.

Currently, in the context of a geopolitical shift in the EU, the idea of reverse enlargement would allow the EU to adapt its actions to the challenges of international dynamics, primarily related to the search for a formula to end the war in Ukraine, the possibility of integrating enlargement into US foreign policy, and the ongoing paralysis of the current enlargement policy. The new rules would also be an incentive for countries such as Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which have *de facto* abandoned their efforts to join the EU. It is also an attempt to find a compromise between the normative standards set for candidate countries and the geopolitical realities of the moment.

Critics of the idea of *reverse enlargement* argue that we have already seen a similar process in the case of Bulgaria and Romania, which, after joining the EU, were subject to the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism, which failed to meet expectations. This is particularly true of Bulgaria, which, despite formal reforms implemented after joining the EU, is currently in a state of prolonged political crisis caused, among other things, by corruption and the public perception that the state has been taken over by oligarchic and political elites. This case, and to some extent also the recent history of Romania, show that with membership, the momentum for reform disappears and political pathologies at the national level gain additional European legitimacy.

When adopting a plan for "reverse enlargement," it is therefore necessary to take into account the fact that the European Union has limited tools to influence the political reality of its member states. Attempts to increase these tools become *grist to the mill* for Eurosceptic forces. Therefore, it is necessary to consider whether changing the rules of enlargement will allow for genuine reforms in new member states, or whether it will rather preserve existing pathologies in the political systems of candidate countries. This is particularly true where the determination to join the EU does not translate into the mobilization of both elites and society to meet the requirements at the national level.

The new rules for EU integration would require not only a clear timetable for post-accession progress in implementing internal reforms, but also the introduction of a reversal option allowing the EU to withdraw in the event of lack of progress and adverse effects on the integration process.

Allegedly, France and Italy are among the main supporters of such a plan. The idea of a *multi-speed Union*, to which this plan refers, is generally opposed by Germany, which is, in the same time, also an advocate of EU enlargement. It is possible that Berlin could change its mind if the introduction of the new mechanism were linked to a change in the decision-making process on foreign and security policy issues. Until now, unanimity has been required on these issues, but Germany is promoting the idea of qualified majority vote.

The idea of “reverse enlargement” is reminiscent of Poland’s efforts to draw Ukraine into the orbit of European integration preceding the “Revolution of Dignity,” when it was argued that binding Ukraine into formal cooperation would create better conditions and increase external pressure to implement the necessary reforms.

European media (including Politico) speculate that Poland could also support changing the rules for admitting new members. Nevertheless, so far, Poland has opposed any changes that would create different categories of EU membership. In this case, Poland will have to reconsider the logic and implementation of the EU’s enlargement policy.